

Labyrinth Angel **(Light Novel)**

Nao Tamaki

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Labyrinth Angel

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Prologue

“**STAY** with me forever, please.”

Whooooosh... The wisteria blooming magnificently on the trellis rustled despite the distinct lack of wind.

“Stay by my side forever, okay?” the little girl said with a smile. There was a mysterious quality behind her otherwise innocent expression.

The girl was only four years old, yet that expression mesmerized the sixteen-year-old boy, stealing his heart... It made him unable to bear the idea of leaving her. As her “chosen one,” he was under orders to protect this small girl with his life.

The two were beneath the breathtaking trellis, its wisteria in full bloom. As the boy enjoyed his book, the little girl stopped playing with the flower petals to crawl toward him and thrust out her tiny, white pinky finger.

“Promise me...won’t you?” she urged.

“Certainly, Miss,” the youth promptly replied with the utmost respect.

The brief cloud of uncertainty on the girl’s face instantly switched to a joyous smile. It was the gentle, all-embracing smile of an angel... As if in tune with her joy, the petals that already shed their flowery bodies to nestle upon the earth rustled as they began to dance in the air around the girl. Seeing her take delight in the flowery display filled the boy with joy. Grinning, he wrapped his own pinky finger around the one she held out before him.

“It’s a promise...Shindo,” the girl said, smiling with a heart as pure as an angel, brimming with kindness and compassion.



“As you say, Miss Satsuki,” Shindo responded. He gazed into her eyes before returning her smile. Only when looking at Satsuki would his eyes, which were colder than ice, grow so soft and gentle.

The two exchanged their feelings through interlocked fingers. She simply wanted him to be with her... He merely wanted to stay by her side... The feelings they harbored for the other were undiluted and pure.

Such was the nature of the “promise” made under the wisteria trellis. Given by hearts horrifyingly innocent and woefully pure...it was a promise impossible to keep.

Rather than tumble to the ground, the wisteria petals continued to dance endlessly around the two. As if trying to hide them as they made their foolish promise, the pale purple petals fluttered up one after the next, only to rain daintily back down... As they fluttered down, it almost seemed as though the petals were trying to conceal the innocent love blossoming between the two...as if they knew what the future held...as if they were wrought with pity...and wept for two foolish children.

14 Years Later

“IF you had the ability to read minds, what would you do?”

The bizarre question drew bug-eyed stares from both men.

“Really, now. That childish flight of fantasy is a rather strange thing to ask, miss,” said one of the men. *There’s no such thing! This brat gives me the heebie-jeebies! I swear, I can’t tell what’s going through Little Miss Daydreamer’s head.*

He was a stout man with a slightly receding hairline. President of Takai & Co., he had clawed his way from the bottom all the way up. He may have been passionate about work, but he was also extremely passionate about women. Case in point, his head had been filled with nothing but nudes of the beautiful girl before him who asked that random question.

“You shouldn’t put her down, Father. Satsuki only said it as a joke. Isn’t that right, Satsuki?” said the other man. *I wish I had that power. Then I could see how the hell the gears in her head turn and play her like a fiddle till that haughty expression on her pretty face crumbles into a sobbing mess.*

This man was wearing a suit somewhat inappropriate for new money. Approaching his thirtieth year, he would follow in his father’s

footsteps and take over Takai & Co. He wasn't particularly gifted and most women wouldn't find him terribly attractive. Yet thanks to the power of money, he never suffered for want of a woman's company.

However, not even he could lay his mitts on this girl, who was several rungs higher than him on the social ladder. As if to vent his frustration, his mind had been racing with nothing but wild fantasies of forcing himself on the girl who sat gracefully before them carrying a teacup to her charming lips in a fluid motion.

He imagined disheveling the girl's beautiful black hair that flowed like silk, tearing the pale emerald green dress right off of her, and raping her as she begged for mercy... He was completely oblivious that her mind "read" all of it without fail...

"If someone had that power, you could hardly call them human anymore," Satsuki remarked. She held the men helplessly spellbound as she offered such a bewitching smile, it was hard to believe it came from a girl on the verge of turning eighteen. "They would be a monster."

Yes, that's right. And monsters like that don't exist, Little Miss.

If those monsters of yours are real, I'd sure love to see one!

"....." As if to shield herself from these leering fools who assumed she was utterly oblivious, Satsuki softly shut the door to her heart.

FROM an early age, people sung praises that the young lady was "delicate as a flower; beautiful as an angel." Boasting tremendous talent, she also became renowned as the "Tsujikawa Sacred Blade."

This young lady was Satsuki Tsujikawa, the only daughter to the president of the Tsujikawa Corporation. In contrast to her raven-black hair that reached to her waist, her perfect skin was porcelain white. She had intelligent, fragile eyes and adorable pink lips that never ceased to smile.

Although she was charming from her early years, Satsuki's beauty only seemed to increase with age... It was hardly surprising for men to entertain obscene fantasies when their eyes fell upon her.

There was one more reason behind her title. Satsuki possessed "inhuman powers." Some might call them "supernatural powers."

From the time she was formed as a baby in her mother's womb, Satsuki spoke to her parents. Even as a newborn infant lacking the gift of speech, she continued to communicate *telepathically*.

Neither of Satsuki's parents possessed a supernatural power of any kind. In essence, she was the product of a spontaneous mutation.

Despite her unique abilities, neither of her parents treated her with hatred or loathing. They raised her with the same loving care they would have if she were normal. There was always the possibility Satsuki could lose these abilities someday. Or so they hoped. But instead of fading away, Satsuki's powers seemed to be growing stronger with each passing year.

"SOON... He should be back any minute now," Satsuki said. Surrounded by the gentle flowers, she lightly shut her eyes as a happy smile spread across her lips. "Hurry home..."

She was eagerly awaiting the man who served as her retainer.

"...Shindo..."

Aside from her parents, he was the only soul who knew of her powers.

"I nearly failed to make it in time, didn't I?" he whispered as the car raced along the Tsujikawa mansion's seemingly endless front gate. Shut tight, the towering gate reaching to the heavens denied all entry to outsiders.

Once he finally pulled up to the front entrance, the security system mounted to the gate identified the car before silently sliding open. He was in an obsidian black Mercedes Benz, its coat a beautiful, deep black. As he entered the Tsujikawa estate, it was hard to believe this long road lined with trees was part of a privately owned fenced-off property.

By the time the front lawn finally came into view, he veered to the left, heading toward the detached garage. Usually, he would drive through the front lawn and park at the mansion's front door. However, he only did that when his "little lady" was present.

Whenever he was alone, he would simply head straight for the garage to park the car. But this time, he pulled the car to a stop in the driveway on the way to the garage. Two of his male subordinates stood blocking the path, their hands held out as if to say, "Please stop!"

The man slightly furrowed his brows. Both of his subordinates appeared horribly distraught. Only one thing could happen while he was away that warranted hopping out of the car immediately upon his

return.

“Has something happened to the Miss?” he asked in a tight voice while sliding out of the driver’s seat.

Held under his stern gaze, the two subordinates—both either his age or a little younger—gulped and straightened their posture. Boasting a well-proportioned physique that towered a solid 6’1”, the young man made for an imposing figure. The deeply chiseled features of his handsome face were well defined. An air of coldness looming over his almond-shaped eyes negated any sense of human warmth. Yet as if in contrast to such harsh airs, his appearance was lightened by a mop of soft, wavy hair. While it appeared black at first glance, his hair held a slightly silver shimmer when hit by the sunlight. His young mistress was particularly fond of his wavy hair.

“Honestly, we haven’t been able to find her for over an hour,” one of the subordinates answered.

I suspected as much... the young man thought. A dry chuckle slipped out upon receiving the answer he had anticipated. This often happened when he wasn’t by his little lady’s side. The sole heiress of the Tsujikawa line—Satsuki—would slip away from ten or so attendants assigned to serve at her beck and call.

“Understood. I shall search for her personally. I would appreciate it if you could tell the others and inform them I don’t require any assistance in the matter,” he said. After issuing instructions to park the car in the garage, he cut across the driveway and slipped through the trees.

This young man was Akira Shindo, the highest ranking of the attendants. Not only was he Satsuki’s retainer and personal butler, he also served as her bodyguard. He received the position shortly after Satsuki was born, and served her ever since. Regardless of what they did or where they went, he remained at her side, never stepping away for so much as a moment. Needless to say, Satsuki placed absolute trust in him.

No matter how inseparable the two were, with Shindo’s sharp mind and intimate knowledge of Tsujikawa’s internal affairs, Master Tsujikawa had placed him in charge of information management at the Tsujikawa Corporation headquarters. As a result, there were times—if infrequent—he would have to leave Satsuki’s side.

Whenever duty pulled him away, he’d ask the other attendants to stay with her, but... Bluntly put, the simple fact of the matter was none of the other attendants were able to handle looking after such a “reckless, unruly young lady.” Excluding Shindo, there were nine

attendants on hand, yet they still made a disgrace of themselves. It made it painfully clear just how well he managed Satsuki on a day-to-day basis.

“My little lady is quite the handful... Honestly, you’d think she is still a child...” Although his words may have sounded exasperated to someone in passing, his voice was overall kind, carrying a tone that seemed rather happy.

“Miss...” he whispered softly in his heart.

“I have a feeling she’s over there...” Shindo whispered. He pushed forward as he looked up at the sprawl of trees on either side before ultimately coming to a stop.

Whoosh... The trees rattled with a passing breeze...almost as if they were whispering to him—like they were trying to tell him something.

Shindo narrowed his eyes as he listened to the voice of the wind, a special privilege bequeathed only to him. Satsuki trusted him wholeheartedly, which earned him the respect of the wind and trees. That was how he was able to feel their “emotions” despite not possessing any powers of his own.

“I see. Thank you,” Shindo chuckled contentedly and offered his gratitude before hurrying over to his young mistress.

“**SHINDO...?**” Satsuki quietly called.

The hand she held out to catch a falling petal slightly twitched. Popped down on the ground, she craned her head as she shifted her gaze toward the plants across the walkway.

Lavender rain began pouring from overhead. It was a shower of flower petals. They belonged to the large, elegant wisteria growing on the trellis. Twining and coiling through the trellis, its graceful beauty dominated that space. The explosion of flowers was so magnificent, any who beheld it couldn’t help but stare in admiration. It was a true piece of art, evoking a sense of sacred wonder.

This large greenhouse was located toward the back end of the Tsujikawa estate. The exterior glass walls were so massive, it seemed like they sprawled up forever. One step inside, and the eyes were met with an endless variety of trees, plants, and flowers. It was like a small nature park. The trellis of wisteria was practically in the center of it all.

Wisteria bloomed from April to May. Seeing as this was April, the flowers were at full bloom. Yet even after its blooming season passed, the wisteria at Tsujikawa mansion would continue to blossom. The number of flowers it produced might decrease, but saying it bloomed year-round was no exaggeration. Those who beheld its splendor couldn't help but be mesmerized. All who saw the Tsujikawa's trellis of wisteria would say without fail "This wisteria is grown by God."

Ever since she was a little girl, Satsuki loved this spot. She spent countless hours of fun here, playing with flower petals and chatting with the wisteria...alongside him.

Monitors were scattered throughout the greenhouse for security purposes, but Satsuki didn't want prying eyes to invade her privacy while at her special place. She felt so strongly on the matter that she went so far as to order the placement of the monitors to create a blind spot around the trellis.

Satsuki sensed *his* presence carried on the wind. Upon holding both hands cupped before her chest, the pile of petals around her rustled as they fluttered into her open palms. She gently blew on the pile of petals.

Whoooooosh...

As if propelled on a mighty gust of wind, the petals hurtled past the shrubbery before her. All at once, the petals that blew off Satsuki's hands dropped to the ground on the other side of those plants!

"Miss," came a voice through the greenery.

Having just sent forth an army of petals, Satsuki lowered her hands onto her lap and looked straight ahead with eyes filled with anticipation.

"You went too far," the kind voice continued as its owner pushed through the growth to reveal the man whom she'd been waiting for. Not bothering to brush off the petals on his hair or clothes, Shindo slowly approached Satsuki with a gentle smile reserved only for her.

"Shindo..." she called in a happy voice saved for him. She flashed him a childish smile meant for no other. He was the only one she could be herself around.

"You're late, Shindo," Satsuki chastised. Although she was beaming mere moments ago, her expression quickly switched to a pout. She slightly puckered her adorable lips and cocked her head to one side as she glared at Shindo.

"I am terribly sorry," he apologized with a chuckle. Shindo approached Satsuki, who was still sitting upon the ground, and fell to

one knee before bowing in apology.

"You passed through the front gate one minute and twenty seconds later than when you said. You broke your promise."

"Yes, I am well aware," he replied. She kept a close eye on him, clear down to when he entered the gate. Yet Shindo found it somehow exhilarating to know he couldn't keep a secret from her.

Under her reproving glare, Shindo quietly took Satsuki's right hand. Lifting it to his lips with a gentleness reserved only for her, he laid a kiss atop her hand.

"I will accept any reprimand..."

Chills ran through Satsuki's body as the feeling of his lips spread from the top of her hand. His whisper and breath became sound waves that penetrated her hand to race throughout her body. The waves resembled a tingling sensation as it embraced her body, warming her very core. As her temperature naturally rose, her cheeks grew red. She desperately fought to hold back this strange phenomenon that was on the verge of overtaking her body.

When did this start...? Satsuki wondered. When did Shindo's touch first begin to make the innermost depths of her body burn?

Shindo was Satsuki's retainer. He received the position to serve at Satsuki's side as a retainer a mere month after she was born. At that time, he was still just twelve years old. Never leaving her side, he spent more time with Satsuki than her own parents, who were quite busy. It was hardly an exaggeration to say, "Shindo raised Satsuki."

Shindo handled changing Satsuki's diapers when she was a baby. During her childhood, he looked after everything, from changing her clothes to bathing her. As strange as it might sound, he was even the one who helped Satsuki through her first menstrual cycle.

There were times she would cuddle up against his chest and fall asleep. Other times, she would whine, "I'm tired!" and make him carry her like a little princess. From an early age, she had permitted him into nearly every facet of her life.

The kiss upon her hand was among their rituals... But there were times this expression of respect she accepted with casual grace filled her with agony of late.

"I'm not going to reprimand you, silly!" Satsuki sniffed. As if trying to escape from the strange sensation assaulting her body, she pulled her hand away and shook it lightly by his wavy hair. The petals sticking to his clothes and hair momentarily rose as if drawn to her hand before tumbling to the ground.

“Who told you where I was?” she asked, stroking her hand through his soft, ruffled hair.

The feeling of Satsuki’s fingertips traveled through each strand, exciting the young man. Forced to suppress the surge of emotions growing under her touch, Shindo feigned calm as he put on a smile.

“The wind told me,” he answered.

“The wind?”

“Indeed. It said you were in here—in the green house,” he elaborated.

“I see...” A pleasant smile spread across her face; she held her hands daintily to the sky.

Whoosh... Wind couldn’t blow within the greenhouse. At most, an artificial breeze would come through the ventilation system on occasion. But at this moment, a wind coiled itself around Satsuki’s outstretched hands. She pulled the wind to her bosom in a loving embrace.

“Thank you... Thank you for bringing Shindo to me...” Satsuki smiled like an angel as she expressed her gratitude to the wind before releasing it...

“So was everyone searching for me?” she asked.

The sound of her voice snapped Shindo back to his senses. In all honesty, he had been mesmerized by the sight of Satsuki smiling at the wind. It was a gentle, fragile smile, like that of an angel. Surely it would captivate any man in the world who beheld it. Yet Shindo dared not let how he felt show. Instead, he slightly furrowed his brow in an expression of anger.

“What sort of attendants would they be if they didn’t get upset when their young mistress goes missing?” Shindo said as if scolding a child. He remained on one knee as he glared into her clear eyes. Before his stern admonition, Satsuki shrunk in on herself like a child getting chastised. “Honestly! You do this every time I leave. Is a spanking in order?”

“Eep...! Don’t! No spankings! I mean it!”

Those who only knew Satsuki’s outward persona would have gaped in surprise over the stark difference in her behavior. Growing bright red, she hastily scooted back a bit from Shindo.

“How old do you think I am? I’m going to turn eighteen soon. I’m not two or three anymore!” she snapped.

“You act just like a two or three-year-old child the way you’re constantly troubling your attendants with these antics... Would an occasional punishment help that sink in?” Shindo threatened.

When he grabbed both of her wrists, Satsuki wondered, *Is he really going to spank me?*

She was clearly beginning to panic as she cried out “W-Wait! Shindo!”

It wasn’t as if Shindo’s goal was to terrify the poor girl. He gave Satsuki time to plead her case while holding onto her wrists to keep her from running.

“I’m too old to get a spanking... Can’t you see how it’d be embarrassing in the wrong way?” she insisted.

She made a solid point. Put differently, spanking her bottom meant she was allowing a man to touch her rear. She’d find it embarrassing even if it was Shindo, the man who essentially raised her... Or perhaps it was better to say, it’d be embarrassing precisely because it was Shindo... Satsuki’s self-conscious wriggling nearly unsettled Shindo, but he managed to mask his feelings of embarrassment behind a gentle smile as he released her wrists.

“In that case, please try not to give your attendants too much grief. You just said so yourself, Miss... You’re going to be turning eighteen soon.”

“Right...” Satsuki replied happily now that Shindo was back to treating her kindly. Then she shifted her gaze to the wisteria overhead.

Seeing Satsuki giggle with her eyes fastened upon the wisteria, Shindo followed her gaze to the vining flowers.

“Did the wisteria say something?” he asked.

Satsuki giggled as she slowly sank into his chest, her eyes merrily feasting upon the lavender lace.

“...It said, ‘Your wisteria is strict’...”

“Only because you’re putting others out,” he replied.

Satsuki grabbed Shindo’s blazer with both hands and nuzzled against his chest.

“My...wisteria...” she said happily. This was another voice that she reserved only for Shindo. “You...are my...”

With both hands, Shindo gently stroked Satsuki’s silky hair. He did so with loving care.

“You can’t go anywhere...Shindo. You can’t leave my side... If I’m troubling the other attendants, it’s your fault for leaving me... Do you understand?”

“I do, Miss.”

Work assigned by Master Tsujikawa—Satsuki’s father—had pulled him away from her side. It was a legitimate reason. This generally wouldn’t be grounds for reprimand, but Shindo didn’t offer such a petty excuse in his defense. Instead, he said, “I will stay by your side. My life and body belong to you.”

The wisteria flowers watched the pair. Its petals danced down upon them. They were bound by an unbreakable bond of master and servant. Even if the feelings they shared stepped beyond that, they could never act upon them. Such was their destiny. A destiny only the wisteria flowers knew...

“**THE** wisteria truly is stunning this year...” Satsuki remarked and looked at the wisteria dangling overhead. The pale purple wisteria filled the large trellis with its flowers. Although it should have posed a beautiful sight, for some reason, a sad expression flashed across Satsuki’s face.

“Is something the matter?” Shindo asked. He was highly attuned to the changes in her expressions and this was no exception. Worry was etched into his face as Satsuki lifted her head from her nest against his chest to look up at the wisteria.

“It’s almost...as beautiful...as back then...” she said.

“Back when?” he asked.

Satsuki turned to face Shindo with sadness in her eyes. “When you first appeared before me...Shindo...” she answered.

Wisteria petals danced within Shindo’s heart. Satsuki’s memories of “back then” flowed into him through her touch. Her memories appeared within his mind as vividly as if he were watching a movie.

BENEATH the wisteria petals, there was a baby in a cradle. A twelve-year-old boy infiltrated the greenhouse at the Tsujikawa estate.

Have you come to kill me? A voice suddenly echoed in his head. *Are you going to kill me?*

The boy could clearly tell the voice echoing in his head belonged to the infant before him. The baby’s eyes shone untainted and clear.

They seemed too wise for the eyes of an infant.

Raised by a band of assassins without ever knowing his mother or father, the boy was never given a name. The “job” he received to survive in this world was to “go kill the president of Tsujikawa Corporation’s newborn baby.”

He killed his first person when he was only ten. How many people had he killed “just to survive”...? He had nothing and no one to protect or defend, let alone a reason to live. He was simply there—breathing—each day.

And now the boy came face to face with this baby, Satsuki. Her wise eyes brought a strange sensation upon his heart.

You...cannot kill me, Satsuki’s voice said in his head.

Upon rushing over, Master Tsujikawa told the boy, “Live to protect Satsuki.” He wanted the boy to find a reason to live, to learn the joy of protecting another. He suggested learning such things from Satsuki.

The boy originally came with the intent of killing this man’s daughter. He had every right to order the boy’s arrest right then and there, but Satsuki’s father did no such thing. There was only one reason for his decision: Satsuki had taken a liking to the lad.

Satsuki gave the boy a name that held the “wisteria” in it. She said, *God makes this wisteria blossom... You appeared from this wisteria...therefore...*

Henceforth, the boy was referred to as “Shindo,” meaning “Divine Wisteria.” Not only did Satsuki spare his life, she gave him a name. He would dedicate the rest of his life to serving the baby as her retainer.

The wisteria was in full bloom. It was so beautiful, it was frightening. When they first met under the wisteria, it was blossoming as magnificently as it was this year...

“I’M frightened...” Satsuki said as she snuggled against Shindo’s chest once more. “The wisteria...is too beautiful.”

She looked up at her “wisteria” through her lashes. Not at the flowers, but at Shindo.

Rustle...! The wisteria flowers quivered.

“Stay with me. Shindo, stay with me always,” Satsuki pressed.

This was the person who originally came to kill her. But from the

moment they met, Satsuki placed absolute faith in him. It was as if she could see his true nature from the beginning.

“As you wish, Miss,” he replied. Shindo lived for Satsuki. He would happily lay down his life for her. Throughout the years serving at her side, Satsuki became more important to him than anything else in the world. She was the woman who gave him a “reason to live” and the “joy of protecting another.”

“It’s a promise...” Satsuki said, her voice sounding bittersweet to his ears.

Feeling endearment for that voice, he replied, “Indeed, Miss.”

The sorrow in Shindo’s voice was almost painful as it reverberated through Satsuki’s body. She tightly balled his blazer in her fists.

“I’m scared...” Despite pressing herself against Shindo’s chest, an indescribable uncertainty filled her bosom.

Rustle...! Swish...! Whoosh... The wisteria flowers quivered as if they wanted to say something. They had something to tell Satsuki...and Shindo. Perhaps they already knew what the future held for the two. Perhaps they foresaw the story that was about to unfold...

Chapter 1: School Angel

“GOOD day.”

“Good day. Isn’t this weather lovely?”

Such greetings filled the beautiful April morning air. There was a gentle spring breeze and bright sunbeams danced gently through the tree leaves. The sunny voices of schoolgirls were a delight to the ears as they echoed throughout Saikai Private High School for Girls.

The young ladies smoothly slid from an endless procession of luxury vehicles that stopped in front of the student entrance. Moving with grace as they spoke with ladylike ease, each one hailed from the crème de la crème of prestigious families.

Pick up and drop off was generally restricted to outside the front gate at most schools. However, the distance between the gate and the main building was abnormally long here. Taking into account the fact such delicate flowers couldn’t be forced to walk such a great distance, a two-lane road was paved in front of the student entrance specifically for pick up and drop off.

The white school building was reminiscent of a foreign mansion. While famous as a school for blue-blooded ladies, it was also known for its intense academic curriculum that resulted in high test scores. It was so highly respected that people claimed the world would be an oyster for any of its alumni and the prestigious families they belonged.

The drop off zone was bright and cheerful with the sound of laughter filling the air like the singsong chirping of birds. But the moment a certain car pulled into the pathway leading to the drop off, that joyful atmosphere suddenly changed as tension spread throughout the crowd.

It was a beautifully lustrous obsidian black Mercedes Benz. When the vehicle smoothly eased to a stop, everyone around it was frozen in place. A young man stepped out of the driver’s seat. A chorus of something resembling sighs briefly rose from the schoolgirls the moment their eyes fell upon him, but their attention swiftly shifted to the backseat.

The young man opened the rear passenger door and offered his right hand to the girl sitting inside. She rested her right hand upon his, accepting his assistance as she gracefully slid out of the car.

“Good day, Miss Satsuki!” piped a young lady standing nearby, excited she got to see Satsuki.

In return, Satsuki offered the young lady one of her renowned

“angelic smiles” and replied, “Good day to you, too.”

The school uniform was an adorable sailor dress with a dark gray and pink checkered bowtie neckerchief. Not only did the dickey go all of the way up to the collarbone, the slightly flared hem extended clear down to the knee. The dress was designed to reveal as little skin as possible.

Satsuki was on her third year wearing that somewhat stoic uniform for Sakai Private High School for Girls. After maintaining stellar grades that put her leagues above her peers and displaying mastery of social etiquette, she attained the position of High School Student Council President this spring.

“If you’ll excuse me, Miss, I shall go park the car,” Shindo said while still holding Satsuki’s hand. In hopes to reassure the young lady looking at him somewhat apprehensively, he added with a smile “From there, I will be on standby in your private suite. I may stop by your classroom as well. If you have need of me while I’m not present, please feel free to call for me.”

“You don’t have to go to the office today?” she asked.

“No, I did not receive any such instructions from the master,” Shindo answered. He looked as if he were folding himself in half as he bent into a deep bow before kissing the top of Satsuki’s hand. “I will be forever at your side...”

“Good.”

Touched sighs ushered from the surrounding girls watching the scene reminiscent of a prince and princess from fairy tales unfold. Why, a portion of the school’s students secretly harbored feelings for Shindo. The desire to see him drove some to wait each morning for Satsuki’s personal car to roll up.

With her looks, personality, and prestigious lineage, Satsuki was always loved by those around her. Serving as the retainer at the beck and call of this ideal heiress was the very foundation of how others viewed Shindo. On top of his good looks, he was a perfect gentleman with Satsuki. The way he served her was just like a knight serving his princess. Compounded by the fact this was an all-girls school, there was no way the hearts of some hormonal girls wouldn’t flutter over such a dashing figure.

“Honestly, Miss Satsuki is always so beautiful,” one girl said. *Gah, I could just scream. I feel like I really am insignificant with Little Miss Perfect in my class.*

“Not only can she do anything, she’s also nice. I wish I could be like her,” said another girl. *Isn’t it all just an act? I bet she’s a real bitch at home...*

“And she’s blessed with such an outstanding butler. I truly am jealous,” chimed a third. *He’s seriously just a butler? And nothing more?*

“It must be wonderful to have such an amazing person look after her 24 hours a day. She must feel like a princess!” exclaimed another. *They’re together 24/7... People seriously believe they aren’t doing things?*

They may hail from wealthy families, but they were still teenage girls. Piggybacking on the rumors, indecent ideas began to swirl around their heads.

“Miss,” Shindo called. Catching the disagreeable expression that briefly flashed across Satsuki’s face, Shindo figured she read the minds of the surrounding students. Looking her in the eye, he cut his right thumb straight across his chest. It meant “close the door to your heart.”

Shindo used this simple hand motion many times since she was little. Human “thoughts” would flow into Satsuki, as would the “emotions” of plants and animals. She could see a person’s true nature and intent whether she wanted to or not.

Shindo always told Satsuki to close the door to her heart whenever she seemed distraught by the things she perceived... It was his way of sheltering her from the vile thoughts of others. He was constantly telling her there was no need to suffer over their petty foolishness.

“I know...” Satsuki whispered quietly and offered him a faint smile before closing the door to her heart that could slip back open if she let her guard down for a second. Perhaps due to the way she described opening and closing her third eye as a “door,” she felt like she could hear a door slamming in the back of her ears when she closed the door to her heart. It was actually somewhat amusing.

Filled with relief upon seeing Satsuki smile, Shindo offered her a bow and hopped into the car. After watching him drive away, Satsuki turned to enter the school building, but someone called out to her before she had a chance to go inside.

“Good day, Miss Tsujikawa,” the young lady greeted in a somewhat languid voice. Her words weren’t drawn out in the eloquent speech of a proper lady. She spoke in a slow, sensual voice.

The teenager currently sported a perm of large barrel curls. She must have lightly applied some makeup, for her lips shimmered red. If Satsuki was an elegant beauty with an air of kindness, the girl who just called out to her was a willful beauty wafting airs of feminine sensuality...

“Good day to you as well, Miss Narusawa,” Satsuki said, returning the greeting with a smile.

When Satsuki offered her salutations, a man in his mid-twenties wearing a suit bowed to her from his position behind the girl she called “Miss Narusawa.” The girl was *Satsuki* Narusawa, the daughter of the president of Narusawa Holdings and Satsuki’s classmate. Due to

sharing the name “Satsuki,” they referred to one another by their last names. While not particularly close, they had multiple things in common, from sharing the same name to keeping an attendant at their beck and call. As a result, the occasion to talk presented itself frequently.

“Where is Mr. Shindo? Isn’t he with you?” Narusawa asked.

“He left to park the car... Oh, don’t tell me you’re here to see Shindo!” Satsuki said somewhat teasingly, making Narusawa heave an over-exaggerated sigh.

“I most certainly am. I was hoping to see him... I only hurried over here because I thought it was about time for you to be arriving... What a shame,” Narusawa griped.

“You shouldn’t let your eyes wander to my attendant when you already have such a wonderful attendant in your service, Miss Narusawa,” chided Satsuki. “Wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Kurihara?”

The man identified as Kurihara seemed somewhat surprised to hear Satsuki refer to him by name, but quickly recovered with a happy smile as he lowered his head in a bow. “Hearing you speak so highly of me is an honor greater than I deserve, Miss Tsujikawa.”

“Jeez, Kurihara! You look simply elated!”

“Please don’t tease me, Miss Satsuki,” he responded with a troubled smile. She was teasing him for openly taking pleasure in receiving a compliment from another before his young mistress.

Serving as Satsuki Narusawa’s attendant, the overall handsome Tadayuki Kurihara came across somewhat cute when he smiled. Unlike how Shindo’s role as retainer was built upon a perfect master-servant hierarchy in which he stayed by Satsuki and managed all fronts of her personal life, Kurihara was simply fulfilling his job as “attendant.”

In a sense, Kurihara was essentially meant to play the role of “enabler” or “tagalong.” Currently twenty-seven, he began working for Narusawa three years ago. Narusawa loved how he bleached the overgrown mop of hair reaching to his shoulders to the point it was practically blond. He wore diamond studs in the two earring holes punched in one ear.

With his wild looks, Kurihara was a perfect match for the flamboyant beauty, Narusawa. It almost seemed like he was just another accessory for her to tote around.

“You must be elated! Hearing Miss Tsujikawa call you ‘wonderful’ just made your day, didn’t it?” Narusawa teased.

“Miss Satsuki...” Kurihara groaned, truly troubled by Narusawa’s persistent teasing.

Giggling, Satsuki decided it was time to offer Kurihara some assistance. “Don’t give him too much of a hard time. I’m starting to

feel sorry for him.”

“If you say so, Miss Tsujikawa,” Narukawa replied and shot Kurihara a dirty look.

Grateful that Narusawa appeared willing to let the matter drop for the time being, Kurihara turned toward Satsuki and slightly bowed his head.

“Well, I have some errands to address in the Student Council Room, so if you’ll excuse me,” Satsuki excused herself, casually waving before heading toward the school building. Underclassmen and fellow third years continued to wish her good morning even after she entered the school. Satsuki warmly received their greetings and offered her own in return as she disappeared from the entry.

“She truly is a beautiful young lady,” Narusawa spat in a whisper. “She has the best reputation and lineage... She really is the crème-de-la-crème...” She sounded completely different from when she spoke with Satsuki mere seconds ago. Her voice held a spiteful tone.

Darting her eyes up at Kurihara, she asked meaningfully “...Don’t you want her, Kurihara...?” with a bemused expression upon her face.

With narrowed eyes, he envisioned Satsuki where she had vanished from his field of vision. “She’s a completely different type than you... I’d love to have my way with her...” he admitted. Unable to suppress his desire, his mouth twisted vulgarly. Attendant and mistress were equally vile.

All the while, Satsuki was ignorant of the crude thoughts directed at her with the door to her heart closed...

“**THIS** should do it,” Satsuki declared with her arms crossed as she sized up the pile of thick books stacked on the desk before her.

They were photo-books about the art of flower arranging. She needed study materials for the school flower arrangement exhibition, and just finished selecting these books at the library. What the selection lacked in quantity, the four volumes made up in size—each a large coffee-table book with thick, glossy paper. Simply hauling each volume to the desk proved arduous in its own right.

Satsuki tilted her head to one side. *I wonder where Shindo could be...*

She needed to transport these materials to the Student Council Room. She originally intended to ask Shindo to carry them, but he wasn’t with her at the moment. He usually stopped by the classroom to check on her before the afternoon announcements, which were essentially allotted time as a short homeroom class. But she told him to wait in her private suite since she had “Student Council work.”

I wonder if he is waiting in my private suite... Deciding to find out,

Satsuki slightly narrowed her eyes... A sound akin to the crackle of snow on TV resounded in her head.

She slowly slid open her third eye, which differed from her physical eyes... Scenery that expanded beyond her line of sight filled her mind. She found Shindo's mind near where she expected.

“WANT one?” Shimizu, a man nearing forty, pulled out a silver cigarette case, flipped it open, and offered a thin cigar.

Shindo was about to turn down the offer, but the man next to him jumped in before he could. “Don’t waste your breath. Shindo here doesn’t smoke, not even cigars,” informed the middle-aged man, Matsunaga. His thin, short frame burst with energy.

“Really? And here I thought most young men smoked,” Shimizu assumed as he closed the cigarette case.

Shindo smiled genially as he brought the coffee cup to his lips. “I would hate for the smell to spread from me to the little lady,” he explained.

“Do you drink?”

“Only for social occasions. I couldn’t turn down the master or an important client if they offered me a drink,” Shindo answered.

“But you normally don’t?” Shimizu pushed.

“I might have a sip every once in a while to help me sleep. But I would never live it down if I made the Miss stink of alcohol the next day.”

“So you hold back on that for her as well?”

“Of course,” Shindo replied with a smile. There wasn’t so much as a hint of dissatisfaction or hesitancy in his answer.

Not only was Shimizu stunned, but also impressed. He personally loved cigars and the bottle. Why, he was convinced all men loved them. It would have been unbearable if he was told to abstain from them for his mistress. He had no doubt he would sneak it behind her back.

At the end of the fifth floor of Saikai Private High School for Girls, there was a large room known as the Guardian’s Lounge. It was the designated waiting area for guardians who came to pick up the girls for early dismissal or after school. However, their guardians hardly ever utilized the facility. Instead, it primarily served as a waiting room or lounge for the students’ personal chauffeurs and attendants.

While the term “lounge” might give a Spartan impression, a cushy rug was spread across the floor along with a sofa and several armchairs surrounding a table. To keep them entertained, the bookcases were amply stocked.

The coffee Shindo was currently drinking came from a self-serve

coffee maker that invited a relaxing atmosphere. This space was where the majority of the chauffeurs and such in service of the young ladies attending this school came to shoot the breeze.

Shindo hardly ever dropped by. Tsujikawa Corporation exercised its influence over the school, allowing him to remain with Satsuki on school grounds throughout the day as her retainer. The school allotted her a private suite on the fifth floor, much like this lounge. Shindo usually spent his days there, but would occasionally make an appearance in this common room. Viewing interacting with others as a form of collecting information proved beneficial to the Tsujikawa family, and therefore beneficial to Satsuki.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Mr. Shindo, you truly are devoted to your little miss!” Matsunaga belted, slapping Shindo on the back. It was painfully obvious that Shindo was a good foot taller than the man. Matsunaga thought he gave Shindo a hardy slap, but not only did it fail to so much as make the younger man budge, it didn’t even make the coffee in his hand ripple.

“Unlike us, he’s an attendant. And a retainer at that, right? The lad must constantly put his charge first and forefront,” Matsunaga explained to Shimizu, who stared admiringly at Shindo, before stealing a quick look at his watch. It was getting close to when he was instructed to have the car ready.

Shimizu and Matsunaga both served as chauffeurs. In fact, the majority of employees who came to this room were either chauffeurs or drivers. There were only a handful of attendants who spent the entire day on school grounds.

The girl whom Matsunaga chauffeured was a third year like Satsuki. With such a long track record, he stood on familiar terms with Shindo. Shimizu, on the other hand, was the driver for a first-year girl who just enrolled this spring. This was only his second or third time speaking with Shindo.

“But I get where you’re coming from. I think I’d want to do anything for my client if she was such a pretty, sweet little thing,” Shimizu opined as memories of the brief glimpses he caught of Satsuki every morning came to mind. The heiress he dropped off and picked up on a daily basis was lovely in her own right, but it was depressing how she paled before Satsuki.

“I bet a youngster like you is eating this up, eh? It must be great to spend every waking moment with such an adorable sweetheart,” Shimizu continued with something of a suggestive tone in his voice. Shindo downed the rest of his coffee and shot a quick look at the man.

“She sure is quite the looker. I was blown away when I first saw her, even though I’d heard the rumors. Don’t they say she’s as ‘delicate as a flower; beautiful as an angel’? Well, they got that right... I swear,

it'd be any man's dream come true to serve a babe like her!"

"...Thank you," Shindo said, expressing gratitude as a retainer for how Shimizu praised Satsuki. Yet part of him felt that if she were present, her heart would only be pained by the perverse thoughts that managed to slip through.

"...HE'S in the middle of socializing..." Satsuki whispered to herself as she closed her third eye.

Satsuki fully understood that networking was an important job in and of itself. Despite that fact, she generally took the attitude "When I say come, you come running!" Yet today she was of a mind to let Shindo spread his wings.

"...I'll have to carry these myself." She slipped her hands under the mountain of books stacked four high.

It was awfully heavy. Even if she managed to carry the stack for a while, there was no way she could hold it for long. After briefly deliberating over her dilemma, her lips curled into a mischievous smile. This was a grin only Shindo knew.

"Sorry, Shindo!" she apologized in a cute, quiet voice before directing her concentration to her hands under the books.

The moment she did, the books began to levitate a fraction of an inch—no, the breadth of a sheet of paper—above her hands...

"Great! I should be able to carry them now," Satsuki exclaimed and started out.

While the books were naturally weightless to Satsuki, it would look as if she were carrying them to anyone who saw her. Everyone in the library who saw her leaving gawked in surprise. Each of the four books was heavy in its own right. Seeing as she was carrying all four at once, the shocked stares she earned were warranted.

"Miss Tsujikawa! I'll deliver those to you later! Please don't strain yourself!" the librarian fussed as he frantically tried to get around the front counter to help Satsuki.

But Satsuki simply offered him one of her "angelic smiles" and replied, "No, thank you. I'm quite all right."

It wasn't as though she was actually carrying the books. Satsuki imagined she could handle the load on her own just fine. She exited the library and proceeded down the corridor that connected the annex building she was in to the school's main building.

"I bet Shindo will have a fit if he sees this," Satsuki whispered somewhat excitedly to herself. She giggled as she imagined how he might react.

As a rule of thumb, Shindo did not approve of Satsuki using her powers. Of course, he made allowances, such as the door to her heart, which would open if she let her guard down. While there was no harm

in playing with the flowers and trees at the mansion, he was afraid she would grow accustomed to relying on her powers if she used them in her daily life. It was a point he had stressed since she was a little girl. If he caught her abusing her powers like this, he would undoubtedly throw a fit.

"He has a surprisingly short fuse," Satsuki said to herself with a giggle as she walked along the corridor, eager to see his reaction. But someone else caught her first!

"What do you think you're doing, Miss Tsujikawa?!" a surprised voice cried out. The owner of the voice quickly snatched the books out of Satsuki's arms.

"These things weigh a ton! What if you hurt your fingers carrying them?!" he pushed. He drew his face close to hers, but instead of angry, it looked terribly concerned.

"M-Mr...Kurihara?" she choked. It was Satsuki Narusawa's attendant, Tadayuki Kurihara.

Noticing Satsuki batting her eyes in surprise, Kurihara must have realized he lost his composure for he coughed to clear his throat. "...A young lady such as yourself shouldn't carry these heavy books..."

It didn't look like Narusawa was nearby. In which case, he was probably on his way to the classroom to get her.

"I swear, you nearly gave me a heart attack..."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you..." Satsuki apologized.

"Where is Mr. Shindo? It's his job to do this sort of thing for you," Kurihara said in an accusatory tone.

Before the conversation could go any further, Shindo came hurrying down the corridor from the direction of the main building. "Is there a problem?" he asked.

Angrily dumping the books he had snatched from Satsuki into Shindo's arms, he yelled, "Your precious charge was carrying these bricks! Can you believe it?! Where the hell did you wander off to?! Be more careful!"

Shindo looked back and forth between the books, which seemed too heavy for Satsuki to carry and the unusually guilty young lady. His expression grew apologetic as he turned to face Kurihara. "I'm sorry. It would appear I came a little late... I will take over from here."

"Yeah, yeah. Just do your job!" Kurihara snapped, sounding somewhat disappointed. He faced Satsuki with his head lowered in a bow. "If you'll pardon me, Miss Tsujikawa."

"Of course. Thank you, and I'm sorry, Mr. Kurihara," Satsuki replied.

"Think nothing of it." Upon lifting his head, he offered her a big grin. Then he returned to the main school building.

"...Miss..." Shindo said, his voice snapping Satsuki from the daze

she had fallen into while watching Kurihara's back fade into the distance.

I-Is he mad?!

"You couldn't possibly carry all of these yourself, now could you? ...You used *that*, didn't you?" he accused.

She was busted... Shindo wouldn't fail to notice what she did. It was obvious Satsuki used her powers.

"Uh... Shindo, look..." Satsuki quickly stole a look at him through her lashes. Shindo was crossly looking down at her with narrowed eyes.

"Shindo...it looked like you were taking a break, so I figured you wouldn't mind if I used it over something this trivial..." she said in an attempt to explain herself.

"So you 'saw' me?" Shindo asked.

"Well...yes..."

"Haven't I told you time and again not to do that in your everyday life?"

"Are you angry?" Satsuki checked.

"Do you want me to get angry?" he asked back.

...Yes. In her mind, Satsuki slightly nodded.

"AH..."

"...Miss Satsuki...people outside are going to hear you..." Kurihara admonished his charge from where he finished toweling himself off after a hot shower. They were in Satsuki Narusawa's private suite.

Not bothering to listen, Narusawa stretched from where she lay enjoying their after-sex bliss. None would believe the two were Satsuki Narusawa and her attendant, Tadayuki Kurihara.

"Silly... N-No one can hear a...THING!"

"Whatever am I going to do with you...?" Kurihara asked. He tossed aside his towel and began to dress; all the while a devious smirk split his face.

All of the private suites were soundproof, so there was indeed no fear of someone outside overhearing the sounds that were issued by either. Ever since Kurihara signed on as Narusawa's attendant three years ago, they had shared many physical moments extending beyond the bounds of their master-servant relationship. It wasn't as though either particularly cared for the other. Narusawa wanted to have sex, so Kurihara humored her. It was as simple as that.

After parting ways with Satsuki Tsujikawa in the hall, Kurihara returned to the Narusawa private suite. Seeing the girl in her suite, he flung her onto the sofa and forced himself on her. It was strangely

grating how Shindo appeared right when he was in the middle of talking to Tsujikawa.

“Couldn’t you try to act more reserved and ladylike...?” he complained.

She smiled belittlingly from the couch as she looked up at him. “Like the Tsujikawa princess?”

“Bingo!” he answered. Kurihara painted a picture of Tsujikawa in his mind as he found the mere idea of the prim princess to be turning him on again. Just as Narusawa began to stand, he dropped his towel and pushed her aggressively back into the couch.

“Ahhhhh! That hurt, you brute!”

“Isn’t that how you like it? Nice and rough?!”

“Heh heh...! If you’re rough with her, Little Miss Tsujikawa will hate you!” Narusawa retorted.

“Please! What would you know? I bet that retainer gives her plenty of loving every damn day!” Kurihara argued.

“Oh, how lovely! I wish he’d give me some loving, too,” Narusawa purred. She clutched onto Kurihara as he positioned himself over her once again. With a lewd expression on her face, she looked up at the annoyed man and smirked. “Say, don’t you want to make the angel yours...? I’d be willing to lend you a hand...”

His echoing moans were all the answer she needed as plots began to swirl in her lust addled mind.

“**MISS**, it’s past your bedtime.”

“Forget it!”

Shindo heaved a sigh in defeat over Satsuki’s anticipated response. Bluntly put, not once in her nigh eighteen years of life had she ever obediently replied, “Okay, I’ll go to bed.” Without a lick of effort, he could imagine the next words that would tumble out of her mouth.

“I can’t help it! I’m not sleepy,” she explained. Just as he predicted.

How many times had Shindo heard this line since she was little? And fallen for it? As that thought struck him, Shindo couldn’t help but ask himself, *Is it my fault Satsuki has grown up so demanding?*

But this was the man who held Satsuki’s peace and happiness with a higher priority over the needs of others, let alone his own. He didn’t feel the least bit guilty, although spoiling her occasionally led to somewhat troubling situations. As was the case now...

“What? Are you saying you have something more important to do than spend time with me?” Satsuki asked somewhat sourly as she glared at Shindo.

A silky A-line nightgown quietly flowed down to her ankles. This

single layer of material was the sole thing covering Satsuki's vulnerable skin. For the icing on the cake, she was on the sofa holding one of its pillows against her chest. And as the cherry on top, this wasn't her room, but Shindo's! Not only had Satsuki waltzed right into a grown man's room, she failed to cover her exposed flesh with so much as a shawl, let alone a robe.

If said by a little girl, everything out of her mouth thus far would make him wonder, "Does she want to play?" It would have come across as cute. But it held a completely different nuance when said by a young lady in her negligee about to turn eighteen. If she did this with anyone other than Shindo, it would have led to an irreparable mistake.

"I still have to finish the work assigned by the master. I was planning to start on it after you went to bed..." Shindo explained. He had taken Satsuki to her bedroom and turned out the lights merely fifteen minutes ago.

Upon returning to his room, he prepared to attend to his work-related assignments. He tossed his jacket and necktie on the sofa back, unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt, and rolled up his sleeves... At which point, the "warning lamp" flashed on.

Shindo not only served as Satsuki's retainer, but also her bodyguard. As a result, he was assigned a room next to Satsuki's in order to be nearby at all times. Ever since he began serving as her retainer twelve years ago, he was always close... Always.

For the times Shindo was alone in his room, such as when Satsuki was asleep, a "warning lamp" attached to the top of his desk would illuminate if her door opened. That way he would know immediately if anything was amiss.

But in all her nearly eighteen years, the light never once turned on due to an intruder opening the door. After the ten o'clock bedtime Shindo set for Satsuki passed, she would slip out of bed and make her way to his neighboring room... Those were the only times the light ever went off.

"Hmmm..." Satsuki hummed, her adorable face grimacing in mild dissatisfaction before turning to look at the top of Shindo's desk. Two laptops were turned on. There were also mountains of files.

The moment she saw his desk, the look of "mild dissatisfaction" turned into "extreme dissatisfaction." Furrowing her brow, she began to wring the pillow formerly cradled in her arms.

"Miss?!" Acute to the aura forming around Satsuki, Shindo began to round on her, but it was too late. She already unleashed her fury.

Smack! Pssh! The laptops suddenly slammed shut! And the mountains of files crashed to the ground in avalanches! Paperwork was scattered everywhere! Not a single human hand was used to

create this disaster—Satsuki did it all with the power of her mind.



“Miss!” This was clearly Satsuki’s handiwork. Fully aware of that, Shindo called to her reproachfully as he marched over to her.

Meanwhile, Satsuki’s eyes were still burning with rage as she spun away from Shindo. “I’m going to give Father a piece of my mind!”

Slipping past Shindo, she held her hands palm-down over the fallen avalanche of files. She moved her fingers in a beckoning motion as if drawing them toward her. Like metal attracted to a magnet, the thick files flew straight into her hands!

“I’ve told him not to dump too much office work on you! Every time I turn my back, he’s increased your workload! What in the world is he thinking?” Satsuki complained.

Seeing Satsuki storm toward the door with the files clutched tightly against her chest, Shindo quickly jumped in front of her to block her path.

“Please don’t, Miss. Although I take great pleasure in knowing you are concerned for me, the master would call me to task if you did that.” The moment Shindo fell into her line of sight while he calmly offered that explanation, brows arched in anger lowered as her face took on a cute, somewhat sullen expression.

“But you’re *my* retainer! So why must you juggle assignments from my father and the office?! It isn’t right for you to neglect me in favor of other work! It isn’t, is it? Shindo, you,” Satsuki paused, softening her tone mid-sentence with cheeks slightly flushed once she realized how worked up she was getting. Averting her eyes from Shindo, she was uncertain where to look. Satsuki continued softer, “...you belong to me...”

Satsuki had an inkling her father wanted to assign Shindo a position at the Tsujikawa Corporation headquarters seeing as he not only knew the Tsujikawa family and company inside and out due to serving as her retainer since she was little, but was also as sharp as a tack. Nevertheless, she couldn’t allow her father to have his way. She was the one who picked Shindo. He belonged to her. Such feelings filled her heart. Besides, she held him closer to her heart than anyone.

“Thank you, Miss,” Shindo said calmly as he took the files from her hands. He placed them on the floor before taking her now empty hands into his own. Both of her hands rested upon one of his, leaving the other hand free to shroud them in its caress.

“You shouldn’t grab things like that so recklessly. What if you hurt your hands?” Shindo admonished.

“...You made me do it, Shindo,” Satsuki retorted. She clearly acted of her own accord. Although Satsuki knew that good and well, she refused to accept that fact.

With Satsuki’s hand in his, Shindo fell onto one knee, gracefully

bowing before her. "You have my humblest apologies..."

It didn't matter whether Satsuki made selfish demands or unfair claims. She was his mistress, posing as a supreme being before him.

"Please forgive me for upsetting you with my poor choice of words," Shindo continued.

He squeezed Satsuki's hands, still clasped in his own, as he looked up at her. Satsuki felt her chest grow tight as she peered into Shindo's gentle eyes, which reminded her of when he was trying to soothe a child.

"...Forget it. I overreacted a bit myself..." she admitted.

Shindo only obeyed Satsuki's orders when her father and head of the Tsujikawa estate entered the picture. He was the very man who allowed a strange boy without a name to stay with his precious daughter out of respect for her wishes, going so far as to tell him "Protect Satsuki." Shindo could never turn down one of his requests.

That was why Satsuki hated when her father gave him work related to the corporation. The company was going to steal him from her! She couldn't help but feel it would tear them apart. She was afraid that if this persisted, eventually it would devour all of his time and she would be left alone.

Of course, Satsuki had a good nine other attendants beside Shindo who provided assistance in various outlets. But attendants were merely attendants, not retainers. If—Heaven forbid—Shindo was released from his position as retainer someday, it was unlikely Satsuki could choose a replacement.

Shindo slowly drew to his feet and offered Satsuki a gentle smile. "Would you like to chat until you fall asleep? Or should I read to you?" he asked.

His gentle smile made Satsuki indescribably happy. She knew that he only smiled like this at her and no one else.

Looking up at Shindo, she offered him a happy smile of her own and replied, "A book sounds lovely. I'd like that big one about Greek mythology!"

"All right."

Shindo chuckled to himself as he approached the bookcase against the wall. *It doesn't look like I'll be able to obey the master's orders today*, he thought. As a wry chuckle slipped out, he suddenly recalled an engagement.

"By the way, we have a guest coming tomorrow morning," Shindo told her.

"A guest? From what company?"

"...He's the managing director of a very large company. And he's coming to see you," he explained. Although his meaningful grin piqued her curiosity, Satsuki slightly knit her brows at hearing the

guest was coming to see her rather than her father.

Earning the title “Tsujikawa Sacred Blade” at an early age, Satsuki dealt with people claiming she was “already talented enough to take over Tsujikawa Corporation” since she was twelve or thirteen. There were naturally a great many who wanted to hold business meetings with her, but some in those ranks plotted schemes that extended well beyond the realm of work. The number of such scoundrels only increased as Satsuki grew more beautiful with each passing year.

“Since tomorrow is Saturday, he should arrive by 10:00 a.m. at the earliest. Please keep that in mind,” Shindo informed her.

“Understood,” Satsuki replied with her eyes on Shindo’s back. He was searching for the book while explaining the following day’s schedule. She found such meetings distasteful, but decided to savor this moment of bliss won by throwing a tantrum. Having come to this decision upon weighing her options, Satsuki patiently waited for Shindo to turn back towards her.

IT went without saying there was no school on Saturdays, but Satsuki was in for a surprise to find her father home. He almost always went to work on Saturdays.

Satsuki was home with her mother and father. After the three finished their first family breakfast in ages, her father wanted to speak with Shindo privately. The other attendants were ordered to stay with Satsuki in pairs. Even in her own home, the Tsujikawa heiress was never—not even for a second—supposed to be left unattended. But just like always, Satsuki gave the two attendants the slip when their backs were turned and went into hiding.

“I don’t need any other attendants if Shindo won’t be long,” Satsuki mumbled under her breath as she entered the courtyard. In reality, the security on their property was bordering perfect. It was hard to imagine the possibility of an intruder posing a threat within the perimeter.

“It’s not like anyone beside Shindo could protect me, anyway...” she whispered in a hushed voice to the cherry trees standing with calm composure in the courtyard. Still only a handful of blossoms peeked through branches handsomely dressed with leaves.

“Wouldn’t you agree?” she asked the trees for their assent.

The cherry trees rustled noisily despite the lack of wind. But the rustling was not restricted to those trees synched with her...

Rustle! The cherry tree directly in front of Satsuki shook violently; a man leapt out of the bushes next to it!

Frozen like a deer caught in headlights, Satsuki gasped in fear! It was a tall man! He was wearing a moss green suit with a lustrous,

beige necktie. Although a pair of sunglasses hid his eyes, going by his nimble movements, it was easy to tell he was young. In all likelihood, he was in his twenties.

The man swiftly reached out his hand, latching onto Satsuki's right arm!

"What...are you—" Satsuki started to demand, but was cut off when the man yanked her arm, pulling her toward him.

Satsuki jerked her arm away in hopes of breaking free of his grip while bringing her left hand up to punch him! But the man effortlessly caught her hand! The hand that previously held her right arm now held both her wrists!

"Let go...of me!"

Whack! With a loud crack, Satsuki's hands were slapped out of the man's grasp! Now that she was free, Shindo planted himself protectively in front of her!

"...Shindo!" Satsuki cried as she rubbed wrists sore from being held so tight. She peeked around the protective barrier Shindo created to observe the man on the other side.

The man quietly grumbled, "Ow, that hurt!" as he shook the hand Shindo harshly slapped in the air.

With a dry smile, he said, "Jeez, you're heartless...Mr. Shindo."

The man chuckled softly as he removed his sunglasses. They revealed a young man with such a pretty face, it was truly the image of "handsome beauty."

"Good morning, Satsuki."

"WE'VE been expecting you. It is a pleasure to see you again, Master Manabu." Serving as the butler for the Tsujikawa family for generations, Mizuno greeted Manabu at the door with the most elegant of bows.

"Good day, Mr. Mizuno," the young man greeted amiably, flashing a smile that could steal the hearts of all the women in the world. Twenty-four-year-old Manabu Hayama was Satsuki's one and only cousin.

"You didn't have to come out to welcome him, Mizuno!" Satsuki snapped.

She stormed past Manabu into the house. Whipping around with her hands on her hips, her cheeks still burned red as she glared at her cousin. She rounded on him, shouting, "How dare you jump out at me and make such a violent entrance! I was terrified you were an attacker!"

"Really? Did you think I was going to assault you?" he teased.

"I-I most certainly did! Isn't that obvious?" she raged with her cheeks growing even redder in humiliation.

As she tried to defend herself, Manabu thrust his face directly in front of hers and tapped her on the forehead with his pointer finger. He jeered, "I'd *never* attack a little girl who gets her panties in a knot over child's play like that!"

That only served to add oil to the fire of Satsuki's raging temper, but Shindo was even angrier than her. There was simply no way he could forgive an insufferable lout who had the gall to tease his precious mistress.

But as could be expected of someone with nearly eighteen years' worth of experience teasing Satsuki and her retainer, Manabu knew when to back down. Before Shindo could lunge from his position diagonally behind Satsuki to strike, Manabu cleared his throat with a pronounced "Ahem!" as he straightened. He patted Satsuki on the head like a child and said, "I'm just teasing."

Then he shifted his eyes to Shindo and gave an impish grin before continuing, "You've grown into such a pretty lady, Cousin. If you didn't have Mr. Shindo around, I might try to steal you away from here."

Shindo's eyebrows twitched with further disgust, but what Manabu said next brook no argument that he had "absolutely no interest in going after Satsuki." He smoothly added, "Assuming I didn't have a fiancée...that is."

He naturally wasn't interested in his cousin, but he sure did enjoy getting a rise out of Shindo.

Manabu Hayama was the son of the Hayama Group president, which included industry giant Hayama Pharmaceuticals. He was essentially set to follow in his father's footsteps. Upon graduating from university, he received the position of Managing Director at Hayama Pharmaceuticals and served as his father's right-hand man.

Manabu's father and Satsuki's mother were siblings, falling into the traditional image of "big brother" and "little sister." Satsuki's father, on the other hand, was an only child. Much like Satsuki and her father, Manabu was also an only child. As a result, he was her one and only cousin.

"**WHY** did you come unaccompanied today, anyway?" Satsuki asked Manabu, looking puzzled. She was sitting face to face with him on the sofa in the living room. It would have come across as cold and uninviting if she showed him to the drawing room at this point.

"Where is Miharu? Has the love-light finally faded from her eyes?"

Manabu softly snorted and looked up at Shindo, who was placing a cup of coffee in front of him. He said, "Did you hear that, Mr. Shindo? This young lady you've raised has the nastiest little mouth!"

Shindo simply chuckled, not saying a word in response.

Manabu heaved a heavy sigh as if to say, "Good grief!" before returning to the topic at hand. "Apparently Uncle Tsukasa needs me for something. I wanted to see my darling cousin's face first, but then I'll have to go see what he wants after this. That's why I came by myself... But, hey, I have every intention of spending the rest of the day with Miharuru in body and mind when I get back. It's not like one morning apart will kill us."

"I'm glad to hear you get along so well," Satsuki replied dryly. She'd known for ages that Manabu and his fiancée, Miharuru, were on extremely good terms. Part of her found it silly how he continued to brag about their relationship after all this time. But there were also times she couldn't help but feel jealous when listening to him. Jealous of how they could follow their hearts and simply share their love unencumbered...

"But I wish I could have seen Miharuru. You must bring her with you next time!" Satsuki insisted.

"Sure. Miharuru wanted to see you, too. We'll drop by in the near future," Manabu promised.

"I can't wait," Satsuki replied. She was so genuinely happy, a smile naturally spread across her lips.

Manabu's fiancée, Miharuru Kono, and Satsuki were good friends. Miharuru was twenty-three. Not only did she know Manabu since they were little, she was even in the same grade as him due to being born right before the academic cut-off date. A smart and beautiful lady, Satsuki looked up to her like an older sister ever since they first met. Miharuru was currently working for Manabu as his secretary.

"I'm surprised Father wanted to speak with you... What do you think it's about?" Satsuki inquired. Shindo placed a teacup in front of her. She stared intently at the pretty, translucent red liquid.

"He said he wanted my advice... This is all in regards to your birthday party, Satsuki," Manabu explained.

"My birthday party? Oh..." Satsuki offered a somewhat indifferent response before picking up the teacup.

Satsuki's eighteenth birthday was next month on May Second. Her birthday parties were less about spending time with her friends, and more about inviting Tsujikawa business associates. It was an annual event thrown in the banquet hall of the Tsujikawa mansion. There was a hodgepodge of attendees, from those who came regarding work to those wanting to sneak a peek at Satsuki. Various forms of entertainment were also provided throughout the course of these parties to keep Satsuki and the other youthful guests from growing bored.

Father never even tells me what he's going to do; he just does it. It's

strange he's asking Manabu for advice beforehand, even if it's about the entertainment... This isn't like him... Does this mean he's planning something big? Satsuki thought, somewhat worried, as she took a sip of tea.

With its mellow fragrance, the tea held a light sweetness that lingered in her mouth. The sweetness enhanced the natural flavor of the tealeaves, serving the brew justice. Naturally, only Shindo could've brewed it so perfectly to her taste. Satsuki would only drink his tea except for when they were visiting someone or there was an emergency at home or school.

Satsuki shifted her eyes to Shindo, who was standing in front of the wagon next to the sofa. He was busily straightening up the tea saucers and such. He must've sensed her eyes on him for he looked up. The moment their eyes locked, Satsuki offered him a happy smile.

"This is delicious. You truly do brew the best tea," she complimented.

"Thank you. Nothing could make me happier than to hear your words of praise," Shindo replied, giving Satsuki a happy, gentle smile in return.

Faintly blushing, Satsuki briefly lost herself in that smile before finally returning her gaze to the tea. Shindo lovingly watched her adorable reaction before looking away in turn.

On the one hand, the two were the image of happiness. On the other, it was an image that was never meant to exist. Manabu silently observed the sight of forbidden emotions drifting between the two. All the while, he had to bite his tongue...

TSUKASA Tsujikawa was the current president of Tsujikawa Corporation. Due to an accident unexpectedly taking the life of the previous president, he attained this mighty position at the early age of twenty. An only child, his father had taken him to work since he was a wee boy to show him the ropes. By the time Tsukasa reached his teenage years, he grasped the internal affairs well enough to run the business alongside his father.

"Tsukasa could kill with a look at the office," those around him said in fear of his sharp eyes. At the age of twenty-two, he met his wife, Tsubaki. She was Manabu's aunt on his father's side. At the time, she was still only seventeen.

Tsukasa fell in love with her at first sight. The infamously willful beauty, the "Hayama's Princess Camellia" rejected his proposals one after the next. Although the battle of wills ended with their marriage, they were not blessed with a child for quite some time... After several years passed, they finally conceived Satsuki.

Clear from the time she was first formed inside her mother,

Satsuki reached out to speak telepathically with her parents. Most would probably find such creepy interactions unbearable, but this was the life they finally conceived after years of trying. She was their miracle baby. Neither could possibly harbor any form of animosity toward their precious gift.

Satsuki displayed outstanding talent worthy of her title as the “Tsujikawa Sacred Blade,” which she received as the president of the Tsujikawa Corporation’s only daughter. At the moment, she was not only considered a trustworthy business woman, but also had connections. Her business skills had already achieved a level that allowed her to talk on par with her father.

Nevertheless, Tsukasa would invite his nephew over to talk in private every once in a while. Known as the “Hayama Prodigy,” the swift wits Manabu boasted of since his early years made Tsukasa take a shine to the lad. If not for the fact Manabu insisted on deciding his own fiancée, Tsukasa would have seen to it that he married Satsuki. Then he could pick up the Tsujikawa mantle someday... That was just how much he liked the young man. Why, he even asked Manabu here for “advice” on a certain matter today.

“Are you seriously considering that?” Manabu asked. He served as Satsuki’s guest for roughly an hour before Tsukasa summoned him to the drawing room. And he couldn’t help but frown at what his uncle disclosed.

“Yes, I’m quite serious. This was something I meant to do years ago, actually,” Tsukasa said with a heavy sigh as he reached for one of the tightly wrapped cigars neatly lined in a case on his desk. After taking one for himself, he offered one to Manabu. The younger man smiled as he waved it away. “You’re uptight about the darnedest things,” Tsukasa pointed out with a bemused chuckle and put the cigar case back down.

Manabu jokingly explained himself as he said, “If I smell like cigars when I get home, my darling fiancée will insist I ‘smoked to hide the smell of another woman.’”

“Well, now! Aren’t you two the cutest little lovebirds!” Tsukasa barked, laughing loudly.

No matter how intelligent of a daughter Satsuki was, he could never share man-to-man conversations such as this with her. He truly enjoyed the time he spent talking with his nephew.

In reality, Manabu’s fiancée might make such quips in jest, but she was not the sort of woman to make such accusatory claims in earnest. As Manabu watched Tsukasa enjoy himself, the younger man folded his arms. He reclined against the deep-set couch with his chin resting in his right hand as he fell into contemplation.

“Uncle,” he eventually said with knitted brows, only shifting his

eyes to look at Tsukasa. "About what we were discussing. If you are truly serious about going through with it, there is something you need to take into account."

"What is it?"

Manabu rose from the couch before declaring gravely, "You'll need to separate Satsuki from her retainer, Mr. Shindo."

"**YOUR** birthday party?" Satsuki Narusawa asked, holding the pretty white envelop Satsuki Tsujikawa just gave her.

"That's right. I think it's a bit silly to hold a birthday party when I'm turning eighteen...but it's become something of a family tradition. My father has every intention of throwing one again this year," Satsuki explained.

Tsukasa informed Satsuki the previous night that she was going to have a birthday party yet again this year. He handed her several invitations, instructing her to pass them out to her friends and acquaintances at school.

After distributing invitations to the teachers and faculty with whom she interacted, she went around giving them to members of the Student Council and her acquaintances. Although it was the sort of task that could be delegated to Shindo and her other attendants, Satsuki felt it would leave a completely different impression on the guests if she personally delivered the invitations. If they were coming to celebrate her birthday, she wanted to make them feel as welcomed as possible. This was a small way of showing she cared. Naturally, Shindo was with her the entire time she handed out the invitations.

"I can't wait! I had a great time last year. That was the most incredible birthday party ever!" Narusawa held the invitation to her chest as she turned to face the attendant at her side. "It was amazing!" she explained to Kurihara. "All of the prominent figures in politics, finance, and business were there. You could certainly tell it was hosted by Tsujikawa Corporation's president. I brought my father as my escort, but he practically ran himself ragged handing out his business cards. But it's amazing how Miss Tsujikawa manages to stand out, even amongst such an impressive crowd. Her beauty doesn't let you forget who the star of the evening is."

"Yeah, I can imagine. Miss Tsujikawa is so beautiful on a daily basis, I bet she must look extra stunning when dressed up for the party..." Kurihara complimented Satsuki with a smile.

The man was paying the little lady a compliment. As her retainer, it shouldn't rub him the wrong way. Yet behind his perfect mask, Shindo was inwardly annoyed.

It was hard to say whether Satsuki was aware of Shindo's inner turmoil as she threw out the vulnerable offer, "Mr. Kurihara, if you'd

like, you're more than welcome to come as Miss Narusawa's escort."

"Huh? I can tag along?" he asked.

"Yes, of course you can! Not only were you kind enough to lend a hand with those books the other day, you chastised Shindo for slacking in his duties as my attendant," Satsuki said, looking up through her lashes with a somewhat mischievous twinkle in her eye at Shindo beside her.

Rather than argue in his defense, Shindo turned on the charm, directing a dashing smile at Narusawa. "I'm looking forward to laying my eyes upon your elegant beauty in a dress."

"Wow! Mr. Shindo, you certainly know how to flatter a lady!" Narusawa squealed. She laughed in amusement as Shindo casually dipped his head in a slight bow as he offered his smooth compliment.

Satsuki was less than amused.

"**YOU** certainly don't waste any time making your move, do you?" Satsuki spat.

The school's express elevator to the fifth floor popped open. Shindo lightly pressed against the door as he stepped into the elevator before taking Satsuki's hand and guiding her inside. The doors slid shut behind her.

"Not that again," Shindo groaned. Upon pressing the button leading straight to the fifth floor, a quiet mechanical noise accompanied the sense of rising unique to elevators.

He threw Satsuki a somewhat troubled look. She was leaning against the wall with her arms folded. Unsure where to cast her eyes in refusal to face him, she traced the corners of the elevator.

"That compliment of yours made Miss Narusawa's day. Not that I'm surprised, the way she has a crush on you. I bet you're thrilled to add another beauty to the fan club," Satsuki jabbed.

"Miss..."

"You've stolen the hearts of so many women at home and the office!"

Shindo couldn't help but laugh dryly at Satsuki's sarcastic snipe. He suspected she didn't take well to how he complimented Narusawa in front of her. Nonetheless, he couldn't help but teasingly retort, "Didn't you like receiving a compliment from Mr. Kurihara, Miss?"

The elevator reached the fifth floor, but the door failed to slide open. Puzzled, Shindo pressed the "Open" button, but the door refused to budge.

"Miss?" he asked, turning to look at Satsuki as a lightbulb in his head clicked on.

Satsuki held her left hand perpendicular with the floor as she glared intently at the door. She was keeping the elevator door from

opening.

“Why won’t you let it open?” Shindo asked.

“I didn’t like it.”

“Miss?”

“I don’t like when someone else compliments me one bit...” Satsuki said in a low voice as she glared at Shindo. “Shindo...have you ever wanted to...embrace me?”

The sudden question made Shindo’s eyes widen in surprise. Her own grew misty in recollection of haunting memories. She fixed those misty eyes hard on Shindo.

“The drive in humans to seek the opposite sex is a normal emotion for people... But ever since I was little, I’ve seen a great deal of that emotion. So even if I don’t peer into the person’s heart, each time someone pays me a compliment...I can’t help but wonder...if he is also having fun raping me in his mind...”

Year by year, Satsuki was growing into a pure hearted, beautiful woman. She could read the inner workings of human minds best left unknown. She could sense the obscene desires of men best kept hidden. She knew the wicked thoughts of jealous women. But no matter what she perceived, her only choice was to endure it with a smile. Never mind how hard that might prove...

On numerous occasions, Satsuki shunned her powers. Despising herself for possessing these accursed abilities, she cried, “I wish these powers would go away!” But they never did—they only grew stronger, more acute.

“I can’t take any compliments at face value... I know that something tainted is hiding behind those flowery words,” Satsuki confessed, tears filling her eyes.

Why did I reveal the pain in my heart to Shindo...? It saddened her to think he actually believed she enjoyed the flattery of another. She found it disheartening to know how little he thought of her.

It only ever makes me happy...when you compliment me, Shindo...

“Miss,” Shindo whispered softly as he knelt before Satsuki. Gently cupping her left hand in both of his, he drew it to his chest. “Please read my mind.”

“...Shindo?”

“And if you find my sentiments for you are even a little ‘tainted,’ then...”

“...Then what?” Satsuki asked.

“Then please send me away,” he finished.

Satsuki was struck speechless. She couldn’t imagine sending him away, no matter what happened between them.

“I am your retainer. Having looked after you since infancy, it would be improper for me to harbor such feelings toward you. I must

never, by any means, sully or taint you,” Shindo said, his words pressing heavily on Satsuki’s heart. None of it was new to her, but it was nonetheless painful to hear from his mouth.

“I mean every word when I pay you a compliment. But if you question the truth behind my words, feel free to read my mind whenever you wish. And if you should ever discover content you find harmful—”

“That’s enough...” Satsuki said, cutting Shindo off. Tumbling to her knees, she snuggled against his chest. “...Your heart and mind are always warm... You’re always there to embrace me in its warmth.”

“Miss...”

“It was wrong of me to ask that. I’m sorry. I know you would never think of me that way... It’s just, it doesn’t make me the least bit happy when some other man compliments me... So when you said I must have liked it, it made me sad...and a little angry...” Satsuki apologized.

Shindo silently stroked her hair. It was unusual for her to speak so openly with him. His heart ached, realizing just how much his thoughtless comment hurt Satsuki.

“After all, you know me better than anyone else... You’re the best retainer ever.”

“You’re too kind, Miss,” Shindo replied. He was relieved to see Satsuki finally smile a little. All the while, he scorned himself in his heart as a despicable liar for claiming...his feelings for her were nothing but pure.

SHINDO left the Tsujikawa private suite to pick up Satsuki at the Student Council Room after school and was making his way to the stairwell.

“Mr. Shindo!” called Narusawa as she popped out of her private suite. Her timing was too good, almost as if she was laying in wait for him. Kurihara wasn’t anywhere in sight; apparently she was alone.

“May I help you, Miss Narusawa?” Shindo asked.

Narusawa approached him with a seductive countenance. She softly ran her fingers across his suit as she cooed in a sugary voice, “I’d really appreciate if you kept this a secret from Miss Tsujikawa, but I seem to have lost the invitation for her birthday party that she gave me this morning.”

“You’ve lost the birthday invitation?”

“That’s right. I’m not sure how to handle this. Would you mind giving me some advice?” she asked.

“If that’s all, I can give you a spare invitation. I’ll fetch one from the car,” Shindo offered.

“Great! Thank you! You are such a life saver!” Narusawa

exclaimed, bursting into a great smile as she looked seductively at Shindo through her lashes.

"I'll be waiting for you in my private suite. Be sure to come drop it off, but remember, don't tell Miss Tsujikawa about this. Well, I'll be here waiting," Narusawa pushed.

"I'll be right back with your replacement," Shindo responded. He had no idea that someone else was heading to the Student Council Room in his place at that very moment...

"**SATSUKI**, is Mr. Shindo coming to pick you up?" asked classmate and fellow Student Council member Alice Misakimori as they were checking the flower arrangements in the Student Council Room for the exhibition.

Not too long ago, the room was bustling with the Student Council and its advisor. But the crowd gradually dispersed until it was down to the Student Council President, Satsuki, and the Activities Assistant, Alice.

"Yes, he should be here any minute now," Satsuki answered. Checking over the flower arrangements with binder in hand, Satsuki held the pen to her lips as she fell into a moment of contemplation. She spun on her heel to face Alice so sharply that her skirt flared scandalously.

"Hmmm? By any chance, are you staying late because of Shindo?" she asked in a slightly teasing tone.

Rather than dodge the question or act guilty, Alice boldly came clean! "Yes, I sure am. My feet are glued to this spot till the man shows up," she proclaimed jokingly with a grin.

Alice was a good-humored girl with a likeable personality. She was such a kindhearted girl, she treated Satsuki just like anyone else while most students found her unapproachable because of her loftiness and social status as a member of the most powerful family in the school.

A fellow third year, Alice's family owned a nationwide restaurant chain. Her chauffeur was none other than Matsunaga, whom Shindo enjoyed shooting the breeze with whenever he visited the Guardian's Lounge.

"Well, Shindo certainly is lucky to have someone as adorable as you waiting for him," Satsuki replied and giggled happily with her mouth hidden behind her hand.

Alice over-exaggeratedly swished her hands across her face as she cried, "Lucky? Over me? Please! We're talking about the man who always gets to be with you. I bet you have to be super attractive to catch his eye... If only I were as pretty as you! Then I'd have the courage to tell him how I feel."

With the smile still on her face, Satsuki turned her attention back to the flowers lined against the wall. Drawing the charm of the flowers to their full potential, these arrangements were supposed to go on display in the school's flower arrangement exhibition. The plan was to carry them to the classroom where they would be displayed the following day.

A fair number of heiresses studied the art of *ikebana* or flower arranging. So while they were put together by students, each piece was truly a work of art. Satsuki was personally making one as the President of the Student Council, but it was supposed to go outside the exhibition entrance rather than inside with the other arrangements.

"A bunch of girls admire Mr. Shindo—not that I'm surprised. He really is wonderful. You two were made for each other. I'm so jealous," Alice continued.

"I'll be sure to pass on the compliment. But in all honesty, I'm happy to hear you speak so well of my attendant," Satsuki returned the pleasantries.

"He looks just like a prince when he escorts you. No, I guess he'd be a knight since he's protecting you."

Simply pulling forth the memory of Shindo serving Satsuki on a daily basis evoked a dreamy sigh from Alice. The young woman harbored feelings of admiration for the older man... Her heart treaded a razor-thin tight rope; one slip and those feelings of "admiration" would turn to "love"...

Alice's feelings flowed into Satsuki's mind... A pang of pain stabbed her chest. The moment those emotions filled her heart—

The vase on top of the accent table next to Alice suddenly toppled, breaking with a loud crash by her feet!

"Eiiyaa!!" Alice squeaked as she jumped back! "...That nearly gave me a heart attack... How in the world did that fall?"

"Are you okay, Alice?" Satsuki asked.

If Alice failed to jump back, her feet would've been covered in glass. The spray of shards could have led to some nasty cuts.

On the other hand, there was a rug spread across the floor in the Student Council Room. It should have offered sufficient cushion to prevent the vase from shattering, but Alice was too rattled over the scare to notice.

"What a mess! I'll let the Cleaning Club know about it," Alice offered. Most students were prohibited from touching anything dangerous that could potentially hurt them.

Just as she was about to call the Cleaning Club on the internal phone system, Satsuki stopped her. "Don't worry about it. Won't your chauffeur be waiting in the car for you by now? I can handle the rest."

"But..."

"It's fine! It's just one, quick call. You, on the other hand, should get ready to go already. You're going to keep your chauffeur waiting," Satsuki insisted.

I can't believe she's even worrying about someone else's chauffeur. Satsuki really is a sweetheart, Alice thought to herself as she grabbed her briefcase and threw Satsuki a warm smile.

"Well, I guess I'll be heading out then, Satsuki. Please be sure to tell Mr. Shindo 'Hello' for me."

"Yes, of course," Satsuki replied, returning the smile. But on the inside, she felt like she was going to scream.

...No... I don't want to tell Shindo how another girl feels, Satsuki thought once she was alone in the Student Council Room.

Rooted in place, she shifted her eyes to the broken shards that once formed a vase. The moment Alice's budding romantic feelings flowed into Satsuki, a great wave crashed in her heart.

Stop it... Don't look at Shindo like that, she thought. The wave of emotions was painful and sad, but also resembled hatred. Such was the nature of jealousy.

Her heart ached. The wrenching sorrow was unbearable. Placing the binder upon the desk assigned to her as the Student Council President, she pressed her hands against her chest with her head dropped between her shoulders.

"...Shindo..." she said, whispering his name. Satsuki could tell the beating of her heart jumped an octave.

When did this first start...? She wondered when these wicked emotions began to swirl within. When did she develop the emotion known as "jealousy"? It was such a painful, sad...and embarrassing emotion.

Satsuki was confident that Shindo belonged to her. Yet whenever she sensed someone else looking at him, this hideous emotion beyond her control would rear its ugly head. It was the green-eyed monster.

It never surfaced within Satsuki during her childhood. Back then, it genuinely made her happy to simply be with Shindo.

How about now? Am I happy simply being with him? No. Somewhere along the way, she started to yearn for something more.

She wanted him to touch her. To touch her shoulders, her hands, and her hair. She grew to yearn for his touch. And when he did touch her, it was coupled with a strange sense of exaltation as her chest grew tight.

"I...am so selfish..." Satsuki whispered beratingly. "Shindo," she started, but continued in her mind, *I...have always...*

As Satsuki lost herself in thought, a knock came at the door. Considering the time, it was most likely Shindo. Jumping to the conclusion it was the man she longed to see, Satsuki grew antsy

waiting for the door to open and called out, "Come in!" A few seconds later, her expectations were dashed to the ground.

"Excuse me," came the voice of none other than...

"Mr. Kurihara?" she asked in surprise. It was Satsuki Narusawa's attendant, Tadayuki Kurihara.

He offered her a bow before shutting the door behind him. "Thank goodness! I'm so glad you're still here, Miss Tsujikawa," he exclaimed with a carefree smile as he stealthily locked the door behind his back without Satsuki's knowledge. "To be honest, I wanted to offer you my gratitude."

"Offer me your gratitude?"

"That's right. It made me so happy when you personally extended an invitation to a nobody like me... You have my deepest gratitude," Kurihara emphasized and lowered his head in a deep bow.

The sight of such humble chivalry brought a genuinely tender smile to Satsuki's lips. "No, this is hardly necessary. It's true that you looked out for me, after all. That made me happy," Satsuki responded.

Kurihara raised his head and began walking toward her. "Thank you, Miss Satsuki. I'm truly overjoyed to hear you say that... My heart has pined for you from the moment I first laid eyes on you."

"Huh...?" Satsuki croaked, taken aback by what sounded like a love confession.

Kurihara grasped both of her hands, holding them tight before his chest as he continued, "I simply must repay you, apple of my eye... I want you to know how I yearn for you."

"Mr. Kurihara?" Something about him wasn't quite right. The moment she tried to break away, Kurihara pulled her into an embrace! "M-Mr. Kurihara...!"

"Miss Satsuki..." She was frozen with shock in his embrace. She could feel his steamy breath when he whispered so close to her ear. "Allow me to show my gratitude..." he breathed.

"...Show your...?" Satsuki tried to repeat, but was too stunned to properly form the words. Kurihara grinned evilly with her pressed against his chest.

"I'm going to show you such a good time..."

"**THIS** is going to make me a bit late," Shindo said after closing the car door and glancing down at his watch. He contemplated for a moment how best to tackle the situation. The hands on his watch indicated it was already time for him to pick up Satsuki at the Student Council Room. If he went to Narusawa's private suite to deliver the spare birthday invitation first, he would definitely be late.

He couldn't help but wonder how Narusawa managed to lose the invitation in the course of a single school day, but it wasn't his place

to question her. Moreover, she felt so guilty about losing it, she specifically asked him to keep it a secret from Satsuki. In which case, the only logical order of operation was to give Narusawa her new invitation before heading to the Student Council Room to pick up Satsuki.

His course of action set, Shindo headed to the main building, determined to move as quickly as possible. He recalled how Satsuki threw sullen or slightly angry glares reserved only for him whenever he came later than the agreed upon time, making him break into a mirthful grin.

“You’re in the wrong, Shindo! It’s your fault for being late!” she might chastise him with a pout. The mere thought of it nearly made him chuckle out loud, but a master of the poker face, he managed to maintain an unreadable mask as he entered the main building.

It was time for students to leave for the day, so the spacious entrance hall by the front entrance was bustling with drivers, chauffeurs, and the students they were ushering home.

Knowing Shindo was Satsuki’s attendant, the young ladies took full advantage of the fact he was alone. Her absence made him far more approachable!

“Good day, Mr. Shindo,” one girl greeted.

“As dedicated to your work as ever, I see,” said another.

“I look forward to seeing you again tomorrow,” called a third.

He had to stop and bow left and right, saying, “Thank you very much,” each time a girl called out to him. In all honesty, the only girl he cared to put on the charm for was Satsuki. But as her retainer, anything he did to raise eyebrows would reflect poorly on her. Bearing that in mind, Shindo made a point to never slight anyone who spoke to him even if she wasn’t the Miss. In the end, such conduct would ultimately help Satsuki.

He treated others with kindness and sincerity regardless of whether they were male or female. Combined with his good looks, he inevitably stole the hearts of countless women. Whenever Satsuki sensed their feelings, it put her in a foul mood.

“You’re such a player, Shindo!” she would accuse angrily. It was always hard to tell whether she meant it or not.

While somewhat distressing, it was also adorable how she acted jealous over him. It was also touching how she showed this side of herself only to him. Although, he shouldn’t consider his Miss “adorable”—not when he’d been Satsuki’s guardian for most of her life. He felt “parental love” as he saw Satsuki’s heart and mind develop into a woman.

He also harbored feelings that excelled beyond “parental love”... Those feelings grew stronger with each passing year. Seeing her grow

more beautiful by the year made these emotions torment him when the single word “retainer” nearly wasn’t enough to keep him in line.

It was not his place to harbor such feelings. He was not allowed to voice how he felt. He would tell himself as much whenever these feelings tore at his heart. But he was filled with uncertainty, unsure how long he could bury his emotions under that guise...

With the express elevator reserved for the ladies use only, Shindo began briskly walking up the stairs to the fifth floor. Eager to rush to Satsuki’s side, he wished he could race up the stairwell to see this invitation in Narusawa’s hands as soon as possible. Unfortunately, he couldn’t frighten the young ladies he passed with the bloodcurdling sight of a grown man hurtling by.

Moving as quickly as he could while nonetheless maintaining a pace that feigned composure, he passed the door to the fourth floor—home of the Student Council Room—as he made his way to the fifth floor, where Narusawa and Satsuki’s private suites were located. He had no way of knowing...what was currently happening on the fourth floor as he passed it by...

THE voice Kurihara always used when he called her “Miss Tsujikawa” whispered in her ear with a rush of hot breath. Satsuki’s body shuddered violently.

“...Are you quivering? How cute...” Kurihara cooed. Holding her frozen stiff body in his arms, he began combing his fingers through her soft, beautiful, black hair. Satsuki’s body began to shiver in disgust.

“I probably shouldn’t say this, Miss Satsuki, but...I’ve been in love with you from the moment I first saw you,” he confessed in a sensual voice. Moving fluidly with the ease that suggested a certain degree of *experience*, Kurihara ran his hands over Satsuki’s face, down to her chin as he lovingly moved her hair to rub against his cheeks.

“Ah...”

Satsuki’s body wouldn’t stop trembling. A part of her felt terrified and embarrassed that she wanted to burst into tears. There was only one source for those feelings.

You always act so high and mighty, so why the hell are you trembling? The moment Kurihara pulled her into an embrace, Satsuki’s mind was so unnerved...the door to her heart popped open...

“...No...”

The thoughts, mental images, and delusions of those nearby flowed into her mind, rendering her immobile. The thoughts of people not present entered as raucous noise with Kurihara’s thoughts loudly roaring over them all.

It’s not every day I getta screw a giant corporation’s princess.

“Let go...of me...” she weakly squeezed out as the whirlwind of thoughts overwhelmed her.

I'm gonna bang this bitch till her pretty little face is totally trashed.

“No! Let go...of...me...”

It'd be a riot if she's better than Narusawa after putting on such a wholesome face!

“Unhand me!”

Satsuki's mind was hit by an onslaught of lustful male fantasies that entered the realm of depraved. She saw the thoughts and fantasies of men who viewed her as nothing more than a sex toy meant for deriving their own pleasure.

“No...!”

This was hardly the first time a man portrayed Satsuki as his plaything in his fantasies. She had grown accustomed to seeing and sensing human lust. Hurt and saddened each time, she simply faced it with somewhat cold eyes and declared with resignation, “That is human nature.” On the other hand...

“Miss Satsuki! Don't be uncouth! It isn't ladylike to scream like that!” Kurihara chided. *Scream louder! That'll make this all the more fun!*

This wasn't the usual “fantasy.” This was happening to her. It was “reality.” Satsuki quickly swallowed the scream rising in her throat. Screaming and shouting in opposition would only give this man pleasure. She wanted to use her powers to thrust him away, but the images rushing into her mind made it difficult to know if she could hold back enough not to accidentally rend him in half...

While chiding, Kurihara held her close as he forced her to sit upon the rug. Then he suddenly pushed her backwards against the floor! Even with the rug for cushion, the floor underneath was hard. It was only natural for her body to be stunned after a man shoved her against such a hard surface. Hitting her head and back against the floor, Satsuki's hold on consciousness slipped for a moment as her vision blurred.

Is this...“real”? Is this man really trying to use me to sate his lust...? This isn't just another sick fantasy of some random passerby on the street...?

The thoughts Satsuki always read revealed the undisguised truth. And then there were the fantasies and delusions that dwelt within human hearts, spawning the moment they saw whatever attracted a person's desire. But this was reality. Unfamiliar fear at the terrifying reality she was being touched—overpowered—by this man filled her heart with greater horror than she ever knew before.

“What...are you...doing...?” she asked. Her mind was foggy from the blow to the head and the opened door to her heart. Her voice

came out thin, like she squeezed it from her throat.

"I said I'm going to show you a good time. Don't you remember, darling?" Kurihara said gently as his hands boldly caressed her thighs. They dove under her skirt, slid back out, only to dive back under. With each "dive," his hands explored more and more territory.

Damn... She's freaking soft... This is the best! Along with Kurihara's thoughts came his mental arousal and its surges. I can't wait to see how she puts up a fight... I bet that prick has enjoyed playing around with her.

A new silhouette emerged in his fantasies, revealing the figure of Shindo.

It isn't right for the bastard to keep all of the fun to himself. He's gotta share a sweet tush like this... I'll be happy to trade her for Narusawa, ha!

Satsuki was filled with sad rage by the complete misunderstanding born in Kurihara's thoughts as he lowered Shindo to his own level.

"Do you...honestly...think you'll get away with this...?" Satsuki spat words of defiance in an attempt to regain her composure, but they didn't carry her usual noble dignity due to her hazy consciousness. It only came across to Kurihara's ears as a woman's pathetic attempt at resistance before getting raped.

"You've got it all wrong, Miss Satsuki. I said I'm going to show you a good time, remember?" Kurihara sneered. His hands stopped caressing her thighs to tear off the sailor dress's dickey and remove the waist belt. "It's the staff's duty to serve their employers. Don't limit yourself to Mr. Shindo. Allow me to serve you as well! If I had a boss as hot as you, I'd give you all I've got, Miss Satsuki!"

With an experienced hand, he deftly slid open the zipper along the back of her uniform.

"No...!" she screamed. A sharper shock stopped him just short of stripping the dress off her.

"I'VE been waiting for you, Mr. Shindo," Narusawa purred, greeting Shindo over the threshold upon opening the door to her private suite.

"I'm sorry for the wait. Here is your extra birthday party invitation," Shindo replied as he offered the invitation, but Narusawa didn't take it. Instead, she yanked his extended hand toward her.

"It's such a rare treat to have you! You might as well come in for a spell," she insisted.

"I'm sorry, but it is time to pick up Miss Satsuki," he declined.

She expected a response along those lines. Her arms suddenly sprawled out as she twisted to collapse onto Shindo's chest.

"Miss Narusawa? Are you all right?" he asked.

"...I'm sorry... I was suddenly struck by a dizzy spell..."

“In that case, you should take it easy for a while. I’ll leave you to rest,” he dismissed, excusing himself.

“Mr. Shindo...”

As he was about to pull away, Narusawa rested her hands against his chest and gave him the same look through her lashes she gave Kurihara when he was “serving” her.

“Kurihara isn’t here right now. I don’t trust my footing, so could you at least help me to the sofa...?” she asked in a sultry voice.

“Are you okay?” he asked. He offered Narusawa one hand while he wrapped his other arm securely around her shoulders for support as he helped her take unsteady steps toward the sofa in the center of the private suite. He eased her onto the edge of the sofa, stacked a mound of pillows for her on one of the armrests, and helped her lay down.

“Would you like me to get a cold towel?” he asked, leaning over her.

As Shindo looked into her eyes, Narusawa scooped his hand into both of her own and squeezed it tightly. “I’d prefer your hand. It feels so nice and cool...” she replied. Closing her eyes, she rubbed his hand against her cheek. “You have cold hands, just like your cold appearance... But I don’t mean that as the unpleasant sort of cold. It’s wonderfully pleasant...”

She proceeded to kiss the palm of his hand. Ever so slightly, she slipped her tongue between her lips, sliding it from the palm down to the tip of his middle finger.

“For such masculine hands, your long fingers are awfully pretty,” she appraised. Once her tongue reached his fingertip, she lightly nipped the middle finger, firing stimulation from its tip. The whole thing came across suspiciously seductive, but naturally, that was Narusawa’s intent.

Narusawa had her eye on Shindo for quite some time. Already somewhat bored of her attendant, she jumped on the opportunity to go after Shindo when Kurihara expressed interest in Satsuki.

“...I wish you’d love me with these fingers,” she said in an inviting voice that would put any normal man in the mood.

Her beautifully rouge colored, seductive lips wet Shindo’s fingertip with a translucent liquid and drew a thin string as she pulled away. A stunt like this would stimulate any man of Kurihara’s caliber. Narusawa was confident it’d work just as she planned. She was certain she could make this man fall for her.

“...STOP! Let...go...!” Satsuki cried, her mind still a jumbled mess from the influx of horrible imagery and thoughts assaulting her brain. She tore at Kurihara’s suit. At least she recovered to the point she was

able to try pushing him off.

“What a treat! Are you trying to undress me, Miss Satsuki?” Kurihara leered. Making the most of Satsuki’s desperate struggles, Kurihara slipped his arms out of his suit jacket.

“This is also in the way. Your attire is far too prim and proper!” Kurihara exclaimed in his growing excitement, lifting up a corner of the off-white camisole beneath her ripped school uniform. He pulled it from her porcelain skin so roughly the silky fabric nearly ripped!

“Don’t...!” The lights flickered unnoticeably with her shout.

“Miss Narusawa doesn’t wear these things,” he went on, unaware of the growing static electricity in the air. “I’m sure the silk must feel nice, but I think it’s sexier when your clothes brush against bare skin. As cute as it is for your camisole and bra to match, it isn’t much of a turn on,” he laughed merrily as he pulled down both bra straps under her sailor shirt. Her bra shared the same embroidery design as the camisole.

Satsuki tried to raise her arms to prevent him from lowering them too far, but it did little good.

Her attempt at resistance was so pathetically cute, it filled Kurihara with joy that blinded him to the static shock he received from touching her. “You’re absolutely adorable, Miss Satsuki... Do you titillate Mr. Shindo by acting unwilling?” he mocked. *That lucky dog! The way she’s fighting, it’s just like role-playing rape! She’s totally into this!* He thought, stupidly believing his actions were “consensual”. *There’s no way I could do this with Narusawa. Man, this is gonna be great!*

“...That’s...not true...” Satsuki croaked as she desperately tried to close the door to her heart. *I don’t want to hear this... I don’t want to see this. I don’t want to feel this! I don’t want to know how humans truly feel! Or see their sick fantasies! Or feel their corrupt energy waves! Or know what’s in their hearts...*

“Close the door to your heart,” Shindo always said without fail when it was too much for Satsuki. Whenever the hearts of others were on the verge of hurting her own, Shindo was certain to tell her that.

He would draw a line across his chest with his thumb and say, “Close the door to your heart.”

I bet he’s having a blast with Narusawa about now. I’d better get to having some fun of my own, Kurihara thought.

“...Shindo...?”

Hearing Shindo’s name suddenly slip from Satsuki’s lips, Kurihara assumed she was calling out to him for help. The thought brought a smile to his lips as he loosened his necktie and unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt.

“Mr. Shindo isn’t coming to save you. I doubt he *could* come,” Kurihara stressed. *Once Narusawa’s sucked him in, she ain’t letting go!*

The nauseating image and arousal it spurred enveloped Satsuki's body. They were filled with such putrid, raw emotion that she truly felt as if she were going to vomit. It sent her mind, which was finally starting to clear, reeling once more.

"Shin...do..." she whimpered.

Where...? Where are you...? Satsuki tried to search for Shindo's presence with her third eye. But as her mental state deteriorated under terror and confusion, she lost the ability to perform the task that would have come easy to her under normal circumstances.

"Shin...do...? Where...?" she tried to get out. She couldn't find Shindo... She couldn't find his mind in the maelstrom of depravity in front of her. This had never happened before.

"No..." she cried. *I can't believe I can't find Shindo...* That bothered her more than the sicko she could blow away if she concentrated.

"You should change partners every so often, Miss Satsuki. Don't you get bored of doing it with Mr. Shindo all the time?"

Through the well of tears blurring her vision, Satsuki was no longer able to see the lecherous grin Kurihara made before her. The light from the vaulted ceiling struck his hair as he pinned her down, obscuring her vision all the more. Satsuki didn't even realize what he was doing with her bra as her body convulsed with repulsion against his hideous thoughts and fantasies.

No... she rejected in her thoughts. *Why can't I find Shindo? Why can't I sense his presence? Shindo...where are you...? Where...are you...?*

"No..." she whimpered aloud. *Why is this man touching me? Why is he touching my skin? Why is he embracing me...? I only want Shindo to touch me. I only want to be embraced by Shindo.*

Shindo was always by Satsuki's side as her retainer. Needless to say, he would touch her hands, hair, and even her body. There were times he picked her up, and times he held her close. Even if he only did these things as her retainer, they filled her with boundless joy. When Shindo touched her, it filled her with *joy as a woman*. It didn't matter if such feelings were forbidden...

She has such pretty skin. Dang, I could eat her up... The man's thoughts were growing increasingly vulgar. Kurihara was so excited by caressing her curves, it put him on the verge of losing control. He wrote off the charge he felt in the air as an extension of his building excitement.

"Do...not...touch...me..." Satsuki squeezed out a shrill voice—nearly a scream—from her throat. But having lost all self-control, the man caught in his own desires was unable to hear her. He felt another sharp static shock prickle his fingers as he stroked her collarbone, but thoughts of the pleasures ahead relegated it to the back of his mind.

This isn't Shindo. This person...isn't Shindo. So why...is he touching

me?! Satsuki tried to work it out in her mind without completely losing control of her pulsating powers, but it was a lost battle.

“Don’t touch me!” The moment Satsuki put all of her emotions into screaming at the top of her lungs...

Bang!! The air in the room shook violently as the ceiling lights, knickknacks, and even the desk shattered as if struck by lightning!

“Whaaaaa!” Kurihara cried as his body flung from Satsuki to the wall on the far side of the room with a meaty thwack.

A prickly sensation washed over Shindo, making him raise his head on reflex. He was absolutely positive he sensed Satsuki’s aura. The air felt charged.

...Something has happened to her...

“Mr. Shindo? What is it?” Narusawa asked, arching her back to wrap her arms around his neck. With her head buried in his chest, she looked up at him through her fake lashes.

“I’m terribly sorry, but...” Shindo grabbed her arms and silently pried them away as he coolly bowed before continuing his apology, “that is not my duty. I’m going to take my leave now.”

Now that made her hackles rise. She was annoyed he didn’t fall for her seductive wiles. “Aren’t you uptight! Of course, that’s one of the things I love about you. But face it, you’re a man like any other. Would it hurt to submit to your innermost desires once in a while?”

His own emotions coming to mind, Shindo couldn’t help but snort. If he acted on his desires, he could never again serve at Satsuki’s side. There was only one lady in the entire world with whom he wanted to consummate his desires, but he knew he could never have her.

“Am I not your type? At the very least, I’m confident I can satisfy you better than Miss Tsujikawa ever could,” Narusawa quipped.

Shindo sensed this very misunderstanding Narusawa mentioned was going around of late. Perhaps it was inevitable when an adolescent girl was constantly with her young male retainer, but in truth, such rumors hurt his heart. Shindo straightened as he offered Narusawa a bitter smile in return.

“If the Miss said, ‘Sate Miss Narusawa’s needs,’ I would happily undress you. However, she has not given me any such orders,” Shindo clerically rejected her.

“You don’t have to act so loyal. Kurihara is probably showing Miss Tsujikawa a good time as we speak,” Narusawa revealed casually, freezing Shindo to the core.

“Mr. Shindo!” Narusawa cried, sliding from the sofa when he shoved her away.

Kurihara was on his way to Satsuki with the intent to “show her

a good time.” The moment Shindo heard those words pop out of Narusawa’s mouth, he turned on his heel to leave. But Narusawa sprang up and reached out for him, latching onto one of his arms. Actually, she barely managed to snatch the hem of his suit’s sleeve.

“It’s too late now! How long do you think it’s been since Kurihara set out? I bet those two are busy ‘enjoying’ themselves as we speak. It’d be uncouth to pry them apart!” Narusawa insisted, believing Satsuki was the same as her.

“Miss Narusawa...” Shindo growled in a threatening voice. With his back turned toward her, he slowly twisted his head to the side to see her through the corner of his gleaming eye. “...Did you order Mr. Kurihara to do this?”

The sound of Shindo’s deadly voice sent Narusawa’s entire body shuddering in fear. But the moment her eyes locked with his, her body froze!

“Mr. Kurihara is your attendant. Is he acting on your orders? Did you tell him to lay his hands on...Miss Satsuki?” he asked in a voice that sounded like it was crawling over gravel. His gaze pierced her like razor-sharp icicles.

Narusawa’s voice caught in her throat, making it impossible to speak in her defense. The suit sleeve she had risen from the sofa to grab slid easily from her stiff fingers.

“If...by the time I get there, anything has come to pass that may taint the Miss...I cannot return him to you in one piece... Is that understood?”

Narusawa couldn’t utter a sound. Needless to say, she couldn’t move a muscle. Her whole body began to tremble instinctively out of fear as if she were stark naked before a serial killer. Turning away from the terrified woman, Shindo darted out of the room.

“What...is that man?!” Narusawa struggled to force the words out of her throat, which came out uneven and tremulous under the weight of her fear.

...*He might kill me...* Shindo filled Narusawa with a visceral fear that he might just take her life in payment for her actions.

“Oh, he wouldn’t actually...” Narusawa sniffled. Her lips twitched as they pulled into a thin half-smile. “He wouldn’t...”

Her mind went blank. Rather than alarm for Kurihara, she was horrorstruck by the implied threat hanging over her. If her attendant had his way with Tsujikawa, it was unlikely she would walk away unscathed. Although he didn’t say as much, Shindo’s killer eyes made that perfectly clear.

TAP... Tap... Tap...

Rustle... Rustle... Rustle...

It all happened in the span of mere seconds... In the blink of an eye, the lights on the vaulted ceiling and the windows shattered into tiny pieces, raining down shards of glass! The desk and furnishings exploded into jagged fragments as if directly struck by lightning! It was as if a mighty gale lifted Kurihara from Satsuki and smashed him against the wall 33 feet away!

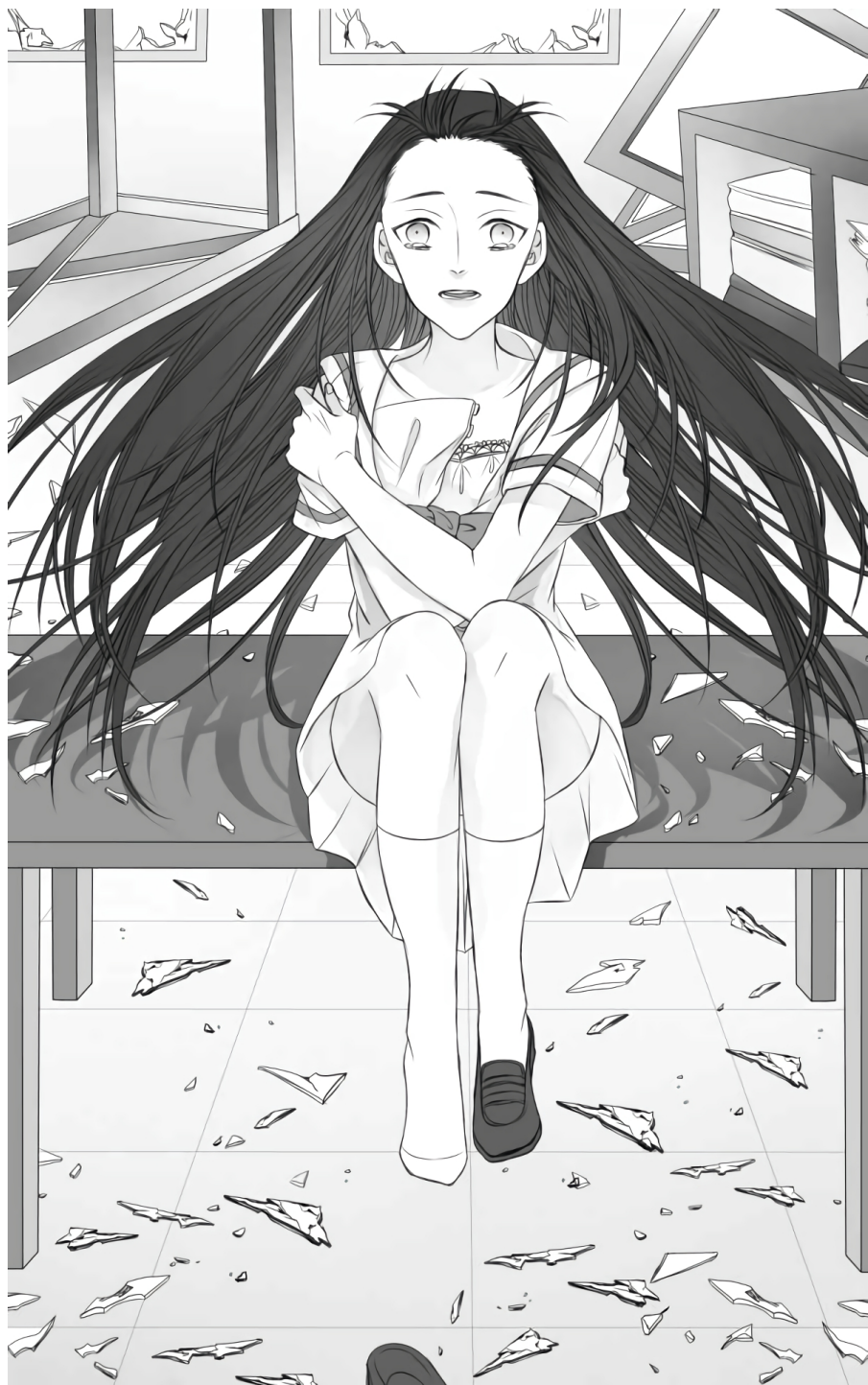
“Hahh...! Agh! Nnnngggghh...” The guttural sounds he made were clearly different from anything that would come from the throat.

As those sounds emanated from Kurihara, his body limply slid down the wall. His body ached all over. His chest felt like it was being whacked with a hammer when he breathed. Did that mean he broke some ribs? When he smacked into the wall, something caught in the back of his throat, blocking his airways. Vomit filled his oral cavity and drizzled out of his half-open mouth.

Between the unexpected shock and sudden internal backflow, Kurihara’s entire body stung as if it were being jabbed by needles. Sparks flew across his blurry vision from a concussion when he struck his head.

...*What...the hell...happened...*? He recalled pinning down the girl he had set his sights on ages ago. All of the preparations were squared away to revel in the fantastic time of euphoric bliss. And yet...

Hunched on the floor in a position that looked as if he might topple over, Kurihara shifted his gaze to the young woman he tried to turn into the object of his self-gratification. Upon pushing herself up, Satsuki wrapped her arms around her chest in an attempt to cover herself. She was staring at Kurihara with a blank expression, her hair charged by the static in the air.



The lights and windows shattered and rained down on them. The desk and furnishings exploded. Splinters and chunks went flying throughout the room. But even with his broken body and blurred vision, one thing stood out to Kurihara: Nothing—not so much as a shard or piece of debris—landed anywhere near Satsuki. As if actively avoiding her, the area around Satsuki was completely free of debris.

“...The hell?” Kurihara choked. *Why...isn't there crap around that bitch? What...the hell...happened here, an earthquake...?*

Shudder...! Satsuki could feel her body reflexively shudder against her arms. It was disgusting... She didn't want his hands on her... She didn't want any man other than Shindo to touch her. It was awful! Awful! Awful! Awful! Awful! Awful! Awful! Awful! Awful! And just horrible! Horrible! Horrible! Horrible! Horrible! Horrible! Horrible! Horrible! Horrible! Horrible!

The moment she screamed, “Don't touch me!” all of those thoughts erupted from every pore of her body! They merged to form a mighty energy wave that made the very air quiver... It was what invited this disaster. He had pushed her to the point she couldn't keep her powers in check.

I can't believe only that...woman...escaped unscathed... Kurihara thought, never taking his eyes off Satsuki. His hatred for her grew with each passing moment. Without a scratch, it was as if she was shielded from harm while he was suffering from all of the injuries he sustained.

I'm going through hell over here... How come she's hunky-dory...? Why isn't she hurt...? Kurihara inwardly fumed. All his eyes could focus on was her—on the blossoming lady whose torn school dress revealed the body of a woman. Her disheveled black hair fell upon porcelain white skin. This alone made for a sight that was all too enchanting. But in his current state, the sight of Satsuki in such splendor only fueled his hatred.

I'm gonna make you squeal like the friggin' sow you are...

“Stop...it...” Satsuki whimpered.

Lookin' at me like you're somethin' real special... Didn't get hurt 'cause you're special... That it, huh?

“...No...stop...”

Who the hell do you think you are? A little princess, maybe...? Sluts like you are only good for throwin' yer body at us sick bastards to bang good 'n' hard!

“No!” Satsuki wailed.

Kurihara's thoughts were flowing into her. His delusions flowed as thoughts, turning into images that diffused throughout her entire body. It felt like she was being torn apart by lust, scorn, and animosity. The combination was throwing her heart into chaos! The

final strings of control snapping.

"Please stop it!" Satsuki yelled as she clung at herself with all her might. Her voice created an irregular wave that distorted the air. And then, Kurihara's body stretched up with a jerk!

"Agh..." He barely managed to get that much through his open mouth. Within the blink of an eye, his blond hair was dyed red. His red hair...was crimson. The liquid that dyed his hair dripped from the tips, staining his buttoned-down shirt. That "liquid" was his own blood...

As blood rushed to his head, the growing pool began to burst from every pore. Finding mere pores insufficient, the blood eventually began erupting from his ears, and even his piercings. The pair of diamond studs popped out in a trickle of blood.

So that's the deal... This is your doing, huh...? You're the one tormenting me, aren't you...? Kurihara managed to think despite the horrible pain. He felt as though the terrifying phenomenon befalling his body was all part of a dream or some kind of natural disaster. In his waning sanity, his eyes bore into Satsuki.

Damn monster...are you doing this...?

"No..." Holding herself tightly, Satsuki was unable to peel her eyes from the sight of Kurihara's entire body being dyed crimson.

I hope you go to friggin' hell, you damn monster!

"Stop it...!" Satsuki cried.

Monster. That word resurfaced from the depths of Satsuki's memories. They were buried long, long ago... She buried them in the innermost depths of her heart because they were such painful memories...

Monster! You aren't even human!

"No!"

Her heart was going to break... It was stretched taut and these thoughts bore a mighty load. Her mind alone was unable to bear the burden of his depraved human emotions...

Save me... Someone, please save me!

"Shindo!" Satsuki screamed. She had no idea whether her voice managed to properly form his name, but it was the only thing that rose out of her throat. It was the name of her precious person who always supported her when it seemed her heart might...break. When the powers deep within threatened to unleash in terrible ways.

She shuddered under the cacophony of roiling emotion until it finally burst out of her control. The room trembled coldly and sharply with Satsuki's last scream. An energy wave expanded out toward the man before her like a blade. It lashed at the vermin who tormented her, pushing her mind to the breaking point...

In the assault, there was the deep, dull sound of something

splitting open accompanied by the man's head...soaring through the air...

"EEK!" two girls squeaked.

Shindo hadn't bumped into either of them, but he made such a sight that the two girls making their way up the stairs couldn't help but cry out in fright. Seeing as these proper, young ladies rarely beheld something as outlandish as a tall man race by them at the fifth-floor landing, the startled squeaks they issued were hardly surprising. All the more so considering the man in question never acted so uncouth before!

"Mr. Shindo?" one of the girls asked, staring after the man in bewilderment as he continued to race down the stairs without pausing to offer an apology for startling them.

"I-I wonder what happened" the other pondered.

The two looked at each other, blinking their eyes in surprise. However, these young ladies lacked any sense of danger. Their puzzled expressions quickly turned to smiles.

"Doesn't he look wonderful when he's in a hurry?"

"Absolutely amazing! I love how gallant he is!"

Unfortunately, the cause for Shindo's urgency was anything but peaceful.

IF a man literally lost his head, it was impossible for a fountain of blood to come gushing out. However, all of the blood pooling in Kurihara's head rushed toward the decapitating wound and erupted out. It splattered all over Satsuki's head...as if in punishment for unleashing the blade-like energy wave...

The head popped off like a volcano blowing its top. It flew like a ball to the wall on the far side of the room where the arrangements for the school exhibition were on display. The head bounced off the wall and rolled into a vase that was still empty. It remained precariously on its perch, ready to fall at even the slightest touch. The vase it landed on was none other than the one Satsuki was supposed to use the following day.

Warm rain drizzled over her head. It was red rain. Although it didn't last long, it was enough to dye Satsuki's body red... It was as if she was garbed in red clothing...

"...Ah..."

Kurihara's head went flying before her very eyes. An emotion filled with insanity flashed for an instant like a light before vanishing. Satsuki was unable to peel her eyes from the lifeless body of the man that blew its top off.

What is going on...? What is that...? Well, what? Am I responsible for

all this? Did I do this...? There was no one to answer her questions. And she couldn't comprehend the sight before her.

The door to her heart was still open. Unable to close the door, more and more noise seeped through. But in her current state, it remained nothing more than noise.

I did this? I killed him? Me? I killed this man? Is that why...I'm drenched in blood...? Because...I killed him...?

"Ah... Nooooo..." Satsuki realized her body was trembling violently. She just killed that man with powers impossible for any normal person to wield. Now she was dyed red in his blood.

I killed him... Satsuki was unable to process any other thought. Her heart rejected all others.

You damned monster! a voice unburied from the depths of her memories screamed. *Go to hell! Freaks like you shouldn't even exist!*

"Stop..." she cried. Her heart pounded so furiously, it felt as though it was about to burst out of her trembling body. She was nauseated and her head throbbed.

Satsuki's pretty, almond eyes bulged so wide it was a wonder they didn't pop out. And her mind was filled with nothing but the echoes of reproachful voices torturing her.

Monster! You're a monster in human's clothing! You have no right to pretend you're one of us!

"...No..." Satsuki whimpered. *Please stop... Please...I'm begging you...*

Her mind had all it could take. It was so painful, she wondered how nice it would be to simply give up and embrace insanity. If she was insane, her extraordinary powers would never trouble her again. But as her heart was about to reach the brink, it latched on to the image of a man. The man who'd protected her ever since she was little. He'd constantly shielded Satsuki from her own powers. Perhaps that was why control failed her when he wasn't around.

"...Shin...do..."

Miss... the image of Shindo said as he proffered his hand. He offered the gentle smile that was reserved only for her.

"...Shindo..."

Perhaps it was because of him Satsuki made it this far through life without going insane. Or committing the unthinkable.

"Shin...do..."

Her heart was on the verge of breaking. Her mind was about to crumble. But she had someone to protect her through thick and thin, supporting her through it all.

He had promised, "Miss, I will always be at your side."

Where are you...? Shindo...? Did I take a human life with my powers? If you saw this, what would you say?

All of the warmth suddenly fled from Satsuki's trembling body. Her heart was consumed by one possibility.

Would you also call me a... "monster"?

Shindo's smiling face served as the pillar of support for Satsuki's heart. But she imagined his smile twist as disgust filled his eyes. Then he spat the one word she dreaded most from him: *Monster...*

Backed into the far corners of sorrow, the wail that escaped from Satsuki sounded as pathetic as a newborn kitten being strangled.

"**MISS!**" Shindo yelled and tried to open the door, shocked by the muffled scream that leaked through the moment he arrived. But the door was locked, barring his entry. Fortunately, Satsuki gave him a spare key to the room "in case of emergencies" when she started coming here regularly as a member of the Student Council. He quickly pulled the key out of its case and unlocked the door. The moment he stormed into the room, he froze in place!

"What...in the...?" his voice came out trembling. He slammed the door shut behind him.

The inside lacked so much as a trace of the once tidy Student Council Room. From the table and chairs to the shelving, pictures and paintings, everything was broken, smashed, or crushed. Not even the furnishings were spared. The *body* of a man was leaning against the wall. However, it was missing everything from the neck up.

Upon quickly scanning the room, Shindo found the head—its face contorted into the most horrible expression in the world—stuck in an empty vase. Its eyes were rolled up with its mouth hanging wide open like a slack-jawed fool. Its red tongue dangled limply out of the mouth. The tiny gust of air created by shutting the door rocked the head, knocking it from the vase. The object rolled across the floor.

Shindo found Satsuki huddled in on herself as if trying to avoid getting hit by the glass shards and debris. As he slowly made his way to her, it became evident her clothing had been ripped from her chest. As if trying to cover her normally porcelain-white skin, her arms were held across her bosom as she shrunk in on herself. Her eyes were glued on her feet. Even though they were open, they were vacant, her expression empty.

"Miss...?" Shindo softly called out to her. Satsuki's entire body jumped violently at the sound. Her expression unchanged, she raised her dead eyes to look at Shindo. The moment his face entered her vision, tears sprung from her eyes. They fell from her cheeks like waterfalls.

"Shin...do..." Satsuki's voice came out vacant and scratchy; her body was as crimson as if she were dressed in red.

Shindo fell to one knee before Satsuki and began combing her

tussled hair with both hands. His voice catching in his throat, he apologized, "...I am...so sorry..."

Placing his hands upon her bloody shoulders, he dropped his head in apology. "This is all my fault for leaving your side..." It was impossible to discern whether the trembling in his voice came from anger or sadness. "I can't apologize enough..."

"Shin...do... I...killed..." Satsuki managed to force her words—choppy and broken—to that point before Shindo pulled her towards his chest and held her tight.

Squeezing Satsuki so tightly in his arms she couldn't speak, Shindo continued his apology in a quivering voice, "I am sorry...Miss...for making you...endure that nightmare."

All he could do was protectively hold the young girl drenched in blood.

"...I wanted to kill him instead..." he whispered in a voice trembling with hatred and anger.

"EVERYTHING! Restore it all!" Shindo barked. It was probably the first time he ever issued orders in such a manner.

"I want everything from the desk down to the furnishings, even the damn flowers for the arrangements—*everything*—put back the way it was!" Shindo raised his voice. He'd already made the directive loud and clear, so it was grating when a subordinate called for confirmation.

But he mustn't allow Satsuki hear him yell. Reminding himself as much, he drew forth a mental image of the young lady and took deep breaths as he tried to soothe his temper. Once he achieved a level of calm, he resumed speaking into the cell phone.

"Do it within the day. Make sure nothing seems amiss if someone enters the Student Council Room tomorrow. Don't let anyone in until you're done. Don't let anyone look inside. I've contacted the school chairman. Five lawyers on retainer are already on the case. The only thing you have to worry about is making the Student Council Room look like it did before," Shindo directed in his usual calm voice and hung up. The moment the cell phone was safely in his suit pocket, he heaved a heavy sigh.

The inside of Tsujikawa's private suite was filled with nothing but the barely audible sound of water coming from the shower room. Satsuki was there at the moment. She was rinsing off the downpour of filth that covered her entire body.

CONFRONTED with the ravaged Student Council Room and Satsuki on the brink of insanity, it took every ounce of self-control to suppress the rage boiling inside Shindo.

He found Satsuki with her clothes torn. Hugging flesh dyed red by the blood of the man who assaulted her, she was trembling in fear and despair as she caved in on herself. If Shindo had arrived even a moment later...he had no doubt she would have turned into something no longer truly human.

Shindo was filled with indescribable rage toward the man who tormented her. It didn't matter if the bastard was no longer among the living. So what if he was like a broken toy with its head pulled off! But right now, he needed to focus on Satsuki and the repairs for this disaster scene.

Shindo came before the long table covered in the remnants of flowers that were once decorative flower arrangements. With a mighty yank, he pulled off the white satin cloth spread across it. All of the debris toppled to the floor. With a few whips in the air, he was able to shake out the glass shards caught in the material.

On his way back to Satsuki, Shindo noticed the man's head bobbing at his feet. Fighting the temptation to stomp on it took all of his willpower. His next course of action was to take Satsuki to the safety of her private suite. He wanted to avoid touching her with a body sullied by the dead. He forbade himself to touch Satsuki's body and heart with tainted hands. It was a self-imposed rule, going back to that incident...

Filled with the urge to spit words of hatred, Shindo had to bite his lip to hold his tongue. In a display of releasing unvoiced disgust, he grabbed the nearby semblance of a vase and bashed it into the head! For all its weight, the vase cracked over the man's head...and split in two. It left a massive gouge in the scumbag's face, but already drained of all its liquids, there was no blood left to flow out.

Averting his eyes from the "junk," he carefully made his way to the trembling young lady. Unfurling the satin cloth, he draped it over her head.

"Please bear with me a little longer," he said and scooped Satsuki into his arms. He wrapped her in the cloth and peeked through the Student Council Room door to ensure the coast was clear before slipping out. Locking the door behind him, Shindo prayed they didn't run into anyone as he rushed to the Tsujikawa private suite on the fifth floor.

Fortunately, the two reached the private suite without being noticed. Once there, Shindo sat Satsuki down on the floor in the shower room.

"Let's just worry about washing that blood off for now," Shindo gently spoke to her. He grabbed the handheld showerhead, set the temperature panel to something on the lukewarm side, and turned the shower knob. A strong, yet not jolting, stream of warm water sprung

from the showerhead.

Sitting on the floor where he put her, the warm water rained down over Satsuki's head. The cloth billowing around her quickly grew saturated with the warm water, altering its form to cling tightly around her body.

"I'm going to gather fresh clothes..." Shindo said in a flat voice. Finding himself mesmerized by the sight of her, he had to consciously peel his eyes away as he made his way out.

"Shin...do..." The sound of Satsuki's sorrowful voice mixed with the shower water brought him to a halt. Glancing back at her over his shoulder, he found that she was looking at him over her shoulder with teary eyes.

Shindo wanted to stay with her for as long as she desired. But for her sake, there were things he needed to do. Not to mention...

Wet in the shower with skin donned in water droplets, Satsuki gave an air of beauty unlike any he had ever seen before. He couldn't bear to remain in her presence.

"I will return momentarily..." He broke his eyes away from her and rushed out of the shower room.

Once he was a reasonable distance away, he contacted one of his subordinates stationed at Tsujikawa mansion. Without offering any explanation, he issued the orders to "Put the Student Council Room at school back in proper order. It is a matter of great consequence to the Miss." All of Shindo's subordinates were Satsuki's attendants. If he said it was for her, they would do anything.

After completing that call, Shindo proceeded to contact Mizuno, who served as the head butler for the Tsujikawa residence. From there, he called the five lawyers the Tsujikawa's kept on retainer. He asked Mizuno to look after Satsuki once they returned home and requested the five lawyers to contend with the school and external affairs.

The fact that Satsuki was hurt and could bring harm to others must never come to light, no matter the cost. His resolution solid, he exercised the full extent of his authority under the Tsujikawa name, bequeathed to him by Master Tsukasa as Satsuki's retainer.

After finishing the last of his phone calls, he grabbed a spare uniform kept on hand in the closet and pulled spare undergarments out of the built-in closet drawers. Although they were merely undergarments, they weren't simply stuffed in the drawers, but individually wrapped in silk cloth.

When first preparing the private suite at the school for Satsuki, Shindo personally ordered they be wrapped in such a manner. That way, if a third party broke in and vandalized the room, the villain's eyes wouldn't immediately fly to her underwear. But in truth, it might

also have been partially for himself.

FOR over half an hour, the barely audible sound of the shower continued. Figuring it was about time he brought Satsuki her clothes, Shindo was suddenly struck by the realization that he didn't hear any splashing. All he heard was the spray of water from the showerhead. But whenever a person moved in the shower, water was bound to make at least a little noise!

Shindo put down the clothes in the changing room outside the shower. Standing in front of the clouded glass door, he called, "Miss? Are you all right?"

No response. There was nothing but the sound of water.

"Miss?" Shindo tried again. He knew good and well she was inside. He could barely make out the figure of a person through the clouded glass.

"Forgive the intrusion, Miss," he said and quietly opened the door.

Satsuki had not budged an inch, sitting on the floor exactly as he first left her under the drizzling shower. But the cloth that once embraced her body was now on the shower floor, billowing on the currents of warm water. Satsuki probably allowed the shower to pound on her this whole time as she sat unmoving, her back facing the door. It washed away all of the crusty blood that once covered her body like clothing.

Thoroughly drenched, Satsuki's pitch-black hair shined with greater radiance than ever as it clung like silk to her white skin. The pelts of shower water turned into droplets against her flawless, porcelain-white skin as they slowly slid down. Even a view of her from the back was truly beautiful...absolutely breathtaking...and terribly sensual.

"...!"

Feeling a heavy weight in his heart, Shindo turned his whole head away to avert his eyes and was about to shut the glass door. But he was stopped by the sound of Satsuki's voice.

"Come here..." she bade.

Every muscle in Shindo's hand tightened. Satsuki's voice mercilessly backed him into a corner. "Come here...Shindo..."

If his mistress ordered him to come, Shindo had no choice but to obey. He proceeded to enter the shower room and stood at Satsuki's side.

"Come in front of me...where I can see you..." Satsuki said weakly, apparently still unable to face reality.

Kneeling on both knees before her, Shindo looked down upon Satsuki. His suit started to grow wet under the shower's lukewarm

water.

“Look...at...me...” Satsuki said as she slowly raised her head to meet Shindo’s gaze. “Am I weird...? Strange...?”

He couldn’t pull away from her eyes made moist with tears. Those wet eyes that could see through anything held him transfixed as they begged for help.

“I...” Satsuki choked out. She was filled with paralyzing fear at the thought Shindo wouldn’t answer.

But Shindo looked at her with such kindness it was pitiful before he placed his fingertips on both of her cheeks.

“No, you aren’t,” he answered and offered Satsuki his usual smile. “Nothing about you has changed. You are still my brilliant and beautiful Miss Satsuki.”

Among the cascade of droplets, some slid down Satsuki’s cheeks. It was as if the shower water was hiding the tears she shed.

“...Shin...do... It hurts...” she whimpered.

“Huh?” he gasped. *Where does she hurt? If that bastard went the whole way, so help me—Wait, aside from the suit jacket, his body was fully clothed.*

While Shindo was reeling in confusion, Satsuki tilted her head to one side and somewhat embarrassedly pulled aside the hair covering her bosom exposed by her ripped clothes. He feared the gasp that escaped his unwitting lips may have reached Satsuki’s ears.

It was clear the reason why her cheeks were flushed wasn’t due to prolonged exposure to the lukewarm shower water. The marks extended from her left ear, tracing her neck down to the collarbone. The purple-red bruises made for a horrible sight against her otherwise porcelain skin.

“It hurts...” Satsuki whispered in a tiny voice.

Shindo realized the scumbag probably made those hickeys when he was about to rape Satsuki. And now they were hurting her.

“I...can still feel his lips slathering all over me... I can still feel his weight pinning me to the ground...” Satsuki repined on the verge of breaking into tears.

“Make it go away...” she ordered with flushed cheeks, her sad eyes piercing. “Make his weight...go away...”

Shindo sat upon the floor like Satsuki and gathered her hair together with trembling fingers. He placed his hands on the cuff of either shoulder, and then...Shindo gently kissed Satsuki behind her left ear.

Twitch... For a brief second, her whole body quivered slightly. As if tracing over the red-purple hickeys, Shindo lightly slid his lips along the curvature of her neck. Upon reaching the stopping point at her collarbone, he began to retrace his steps back up.

Her whole body jolted, trembling as if it were quivering at his touch. It was nothing like when she was trembled out of shock or cold. This was clearly the quivering unique to when she was being satisfied as a woman.

Shindo wrapped his arms around her waist as he laid her against the shower room floor and laid on top of her. With his body on hers, he caressed Satsuki's head with both hands before kissing fiercely along her neck this time.

"...Mmm...ph..." The sad, nasal sound that instinctively came from Satsuki sent quivers running through Shindo this time. Although it should go without saying, he had never heard Satsuki make such a sound before, even after spending nearly eighteen years at her side.

"Shin...do..." Satsuki breathed his name as she wrapped her arms around his back. The showerhead pelted warm water upon him.

"Shindo..." As her sweet, happy voice reverberated throughout his body, filling him with agony, Shindo had to desperately fend off the sadness that filled his heart. By saturating Satsuki's body with the sensation of his own weight, he overwrote the pain she suffered with new pain.

"Miss..." he whispered.

The downpour of shower water soaked them in its wet embrace. The sound of the water drowned out their hushed whispers. It almost seemed as if the water was trying to wash away their hearts on the verge of truly becoming one. As if it was trying to prevent them from ever interlocking. The shower's warm water tried to wash away their feelings for one another as it drowned the whispers—the words that spilled from their lips—in the sound of its drizzle.

"Does...does it still hurt?" Shindo asked after a while. He pulled away from Satsuki's neck, his cheeks flushed as he gazed upon her.

"No..." Satsuki answered with a smile that was both embarrassed and sad. "It doesn't hurt anymore... You made the pain go away, Shindo..."

Her arms still wrapped around him, she grasped tightly onto the back of his sopping wet suit.

"All I can feel...is your weight... And that's all I want to feel..." she added.

"Miss..."

Satsuki clung tightly to Shindo and began sobbing.

"Thank you...Shindo..." she whispered, her fingers clinging onto Shindo so tightly it looked as if they might break.

SOMEONE tried to assassinate the president of Tsujikawa Corporation's only daughter. A bomb planted by the culprit resulted in one fatality. The company would lose face if the public heard about

the death of a bystander. With that in mind, they humbly requested the situation remain confidential... Between the lawyers and attendants pulling all of their strings, the “bombing” at the school’s Student Council Room never received mass media coverage.

It was believed this incident was brought to a close with the life of a man who allowed lust to consume him. However, Narusawa Holdings’ stock prices crashed shortly thereafter, putting the company in crisis. As everyone frantically tried to determine the cause for the crash, perhaps Satsuki Narusawa expected it as she trembled in fear.

Everything disappeared into the darkness. Along with Satsuki’s heart, everything was hurled into the thick cloying fog of war...

Chapter 2: Forgetful Angel

“YOU really had me worried,” said a young woman with pretty auburn hair. Although not as soft as Shindo’s hair, it still held a shine. The slightly wavy hair dangled to roughly the middle of her back.

A smile as gentle and kind as a spring sunbeam rose upon her fair visage that was lightly colored with makeup. She radiated such sweetness, she practically melded with her pastel pink dress.

“I couldn’t believe my ears when I heard about your accident at school,” she continued with a giggle as she exquisitely added each of the ivory roses held in one hand to the vase. Upon putting together a beautiful arrangement, she turned and offered a smile to Satsuki, who was sitting propped up in bed.

“May I leave this at your bedside?” she asked. Her warm smile filled Satsuki with a sense of ease.

“I’d love that! After all, it was so sweet of you to bring them, Miharuru,” Satsuki answered with a soft grin.

The smile still upon her lips, Miharuru Kono put the vase of roses on the nightstand at the side of the bed. Then she leaned toward Satsuki and held her pointer finger between them. A look of mischief was suddenly written all over her face. “Now listen! Don’t abuse the bed, okay? You’ll knock over the vase if you do!”

“I-I don’t abuse my bed! It’s not like I toss and turn that much in my sleep!” Satsuki cried.

“Mr. Shindo doesn’t warm your bed? But doesn’t he stay with you until you fall asleep?” Miharuru continued naughtily.

“N-No! We don’t do anything like that!” Satsuki protested.

“Really? You don’t?” Miharuru confirmed, disappointed.

“Miharuru!”

The sight of Satsuki so indignant threw Miharuru into a fit of giggles. Who beyond these walls could ever imagine that the president of the Tsujikawa Corporation’s only daughter, whose levelheadedness and outstanding talent earned her the title of “Tsujikawa Sacred Blade,” was flustered with cheeks blazing red over such a simple comment on her sex life or rather lack of one.

This was a side she could never show in public. Just as there were sides she could only reveal to her most trusted retainer, she was only able to turn into a girl in love before Miharuru, the sole person aware of the fact Shindo had stolen her heart.

As the corporation president’s daughter, it was essentially taboo

for her to confide with anyone about her feelings for an attendant. But as these feelings threw Satsuki's heart into turmoil, Miharu's kind nature drew the words out of her. Upon learning the truth, Miharu didn't make her the talk of the town, nor did she reprimand her for "harboring indecent emotions." Rather, she became a close confidant who offered Satsuki her full support.

As a result, Satsuki loved and respected her like an older sister. The two met right before Satsuki turned fourteen, almost exactly four years ago. Not only was the older woman Manabu Hayama's fiancée, she was also his secretary.

"Teehee! I'm sorry." The mischievous look was instantly replaced by a sweet smile as Miharu apologized and patted Satsuki on the head. "Please don't look at me with those big, sad puppy eyes. If Mr. Shindo found you like this, he'd never let me hear the end of it."

Did I look like I was about to cry? Satsuki wondered, cupping her cheeks in both hands. The warmth of her cheeks burning traveled to the palms of her hands.

She found it embarrassing for her cheeks to flare such a bright red over the mere mention of Shindo. Normally when someone raved about how they were "jealous such a wonderful attendant waited upon her every beck and call," it didn't bring the least bit of color to her cheeks. But it was a different story when it came from Miharu. After all, Miharu knew how Satsuki felt about Shindo. So whenever she heard the older woman say his name, it made her heart pitter-patter.

She was only able to entertain feelings like a normal girl when she was with Miharu. And she loved Miharu for taking it in stride as if this was perfectly normal.

"Who would never let you hear the end of it, Miss Miharu?" Shindo asked, apparently only catching the tail end of the conversation. He knocked three times on the partially open bedroom door before letting himself in. "I brought some tea, ladies. I hope it is to your liking."

While balancing the tray on his left hand, he set the teacups on the small table beside the nightstand. As he was placing them down, he noticed the roses decorating the nightstand.

"I see Miss Miharu brought a bouquet of roses. Thank you for arranging them so beautifully. I'm certain they will help comfort the Miss's heart," Shindo said, expressing his gratitude with an endearing smile.

Miharu returned it with a smile of her own. "Why, it was nothing. Just don't wallop the mattress so hard it knocks them over, Mr. Shindo!"

"Wallop? Me?"

“M-Miharu!” Satsuki frantically cut in, putting an end to Miharu’s attempt to involve Shindo in her dirty jokes.

Even though Shindo was always at Satsuki’s side, it was nevertheless a rare sight to see the young lady so flustered. Satsuki was beet red as she glared daggers at Miharu, who was giggling with her mouth hidden behind her hands. The conversation completely flew over Shindo’s head. He could tell they had been talking about him while he stepped out, but he didn’t particularly mind since there was a sense of happiness in Satsuki’s frantic protests. If Satsuki was smiling, he was content.

Offering Miharu his hand, he escorted her to the heavily cushioned chair brought in by another attendant. Upon easing into the chair, she looked up at him and asked, “Not to change the subject, but have you seen Manabu, Mr. Shindo? Is he done yet?”

Miharu naturally came to the mansion with Manabu. Catching word of Satsuki’s accident, the couple decided to put their Sunday morning to good use and pay a visit. Going by the way Manabu bailed on visiting Satsuki with Miharu in favor of meeting Tsukasa, he already had plans to come see her father anyway. Manabu claimed it’d only take “half an hour,” but that was nearly an hour ago.

“I’m afraid I haven’t, but I believe he should finish any time now,” Shindo replied as he ran his eyes over his watch before slowly returning his gaze to the somewhat disgruntled Miharu. He suspected she was slightly annoyed that Manabu was taking forever to make his appearance after they came to cheer Satsuki up together.

Shindo picked up one of the teacups he had set down and offered it to Miharu with a bow. “There is a hint of lavender in the sugar cubes. I believe they may offer some comfort. If you like, I will strive to keep you entertained, so please don’t look so upset. That having been said, don’t expect too much of me, for none could possibly comfort you as well as Master Manabu,” Shindo said oozing charm that made Miharu giggle.

In better spirits, Miharu picked up the teacup and dropped one of the light purple sugar cubes on the saucer into the black tea. She spun her spoon around the reddish liquid before slightly raising the whole set—teacup and saucer—to enjoy the fragrance. A light scent that was soothing to the heart combined with the mellow fragrance of the tea tickled the tip of her nose.

“You’re right! It does have a hint of lavender. What a wonderful idea! Thank you, Mr. Shindo.”

“The pleasure is mine. I’m honored if you take any comfort in this.”

“Plenty! But isn’t there one other lady here you should be ‘comforting,’ Mr. Shindo?”

“Huh?”

With a wave of her hands, Miharu gestured to Satsuki, who was sitting right before them. When his attention turned to Satsuki, he saw dark clouds hanging over her face.

“Miss, are you not feeling—” he started to ask. As he drew to her side, Satsuki swung her head away. Whenever he was overly attentive to anyone else, she would act up. While Shindo found this quirk of hers troublesome, it didn’t truly annoy him.

Satsuki recognized the emotion in herself as jealousy, but when it came to Shindo, her emotions were beyond her control. Part of her felt that since Shindo was her retainer, he belonged to her. Seeing him display acts of kind consideration toward others drove her crazy.

*But that’s no excuse to get upset just because he was nice to Miharu... I’m awful...*she reprimanded herself, fully aware that she had a tendency to overreact. But her over-possessive desires only grew stronger with each passing year.

I only want him to look at me. I don’t want him to be nice to anyone else. Although these were normal emotions to experience when in love, they were emotions she was never supposed to harbor for her retainer. That was why she kept them tucked away. She had to replace them with feelings as his “mistress.”

“You’re my retainer, remember? What made you think it was wise to tend to her first?” Satsuki pouted.

“I’m terribly sorry,” Shindo apologized with a chuckle as he gazed down upon the glowering young lady.

As it dawned on her that Miharu was enjoying the spectacle, Satsuki changed the topic, “Still, I’m surprised you heard—about how I was involved in that incident at school, I mean. Shindo was immaculate about covering the whole affair...”

This issued a proud chuckle from Miharu. She boasted, “As Manabu would say, ‘My information network is perfect.’ But in all honesty, the star employee of our managing director’s pet IT division found the tidbits of information and pieced it all together this time.”

“He’s among the group of people Manabu chose for that ‘Managing Director’s Inner Court’ of his, isn’t he? It’s actually rather frightening how he’s surrounded himself with such brilliant minds. I’m amazed someone other than Manabu saw through Shindo’s handiwork,” Satsuki remarked.

With a chuckle, Miharu smiled proudly as she took another sip of tea. In reality, she didn’t know what truly happened in the Student Council Room. Satsuki and Shindo were the only ones who knew the truth in its entirety. With the assistance of the lawyers and other attendants, they twisted that truth, turning the incident into a bombing. But not even the lawyers and attendants knew all of the

facts. While he didn't uncover the actual facts, Manabu managed to discover the "artificial truth" that Shindo strove to bury.

Satsuki spent these past few days following the incident at home. It was necessary for her image since the members of the school board knew she was involved in the "bombing."

Without thinking about it, Satsuki pressed her hand against the left side of her neck, hidden under her delicate soft hair. From her neck down to her collarbone, she was bound with gauze. The red-purple hickeys were too great of a contrast against her porcelain-white skin. She couldn't bear to leave those horrible marks out for all to see. Shindo was the only one she ever allowed to change the gauze.

Even though it had been a few days, these hickeys always reminded her of the sensation of Shindo's lips against her skin. When he sucked hard—yet gently—against her flesh, the inner depths of her body grew tingly. And the weight of his body filled her core with a pleasant warmth that utterly scoured the filth of her would be rapist.

"Does it hurt?" Shindo bent down and asked in a hushed voice upon noticing Satsuki's silent reverie with her hand over the gauze.

Directing her attention to him, her cheeks instantly grew hot. Held in his gaze, she was struck by the desire to keep his eyes forever locked on her. Overwhelmed by such desires, she missed her chance to look away.

"No..." Satsuki answered with her cheeks flushed. She narrowed her eyes sadly, answering in a tremulous whisper, "I'm fine..."

The sight of Satsuki so fragile made Shindo miss his chance to look away this time. Seeing her make this expression painted vivid memories of an experience in the shower he had to forget. The feeling of her soft body under him was all too vivid. Her skin felt warm and moist under his touch. Latched to his lips, her neck beckoned to him as a man to claim all of her for himself. It took every ounce of self-control to suppress such carnal desires, leaving him utterly exhausted in mind and body.

"It's just a bit hot..." Satsuki whispered and pulled her hand away from her neck.

"Let me know if it gets too hot. I'll bring something to cool you down," he offered.

"Okay."

Enjoying the faint fragrance of lavender, Miharuru faked dozing off as she spied on the two through slit eyes. As she watched them, she knitted her brows in a pained frown.

Even if my body cools down on the outside, there is no cooling this inner warmth... Satsuki couldn't help but think as she looked up at Shindo

For a brief moment, the meaning—the emotion—behind Shindo

and Satsuki's locked gazes was different from usual. But as if trying to avoid that emotion, the two averted their eyes at the same time. Satsuki was the heiress. Shindo was her retainer. Neither was ever supposed to realize they harbored feelings for the other. And even if they did...they must pretend otherwise...

The incident in the shower room must never replay in the minds of either. They must forget the warmth of the other's body... The hot passion of the other's heart... They must forget the emotions filling them...

"I think you should put some more thought into this."

In the entire world, this was probably the only man outside of the intermediate family who could find fault with documents presented by the current president of Tsujikawa Corporation.

"They just don't sit right with me," Manabu said and slapped the stack of documents on the table in front of him. He sank into his chair and continued, "They aren't good enough. Not for Satsuki."

With his chin propped on his right hand, a contemplative expression washed over Manabu's face. The sight drew a vinegary smile from the older man sitting on the opposite side of the marble table. It was followed by a long pause of silence that weighed on the spacious living room. Eventually, Tsukasa broke the silence with an exasperated sigh. "You're being too harsh, Manabu."

"Are you honestly satisfied with the four you picked, Uncle?" Manabu asked, shifting the hand at his chin to indicate the documents he rudely flung onto the table only moments ago.

His shoulders visibly dropping, Tsukasa heaved another hard sigh and relented, "I'll admit, I did make some allowances."

"That isn't like you. You never compromise on the business front. Isn't this just as important—no, even more important?" Manabu demanded.

"Yes, of course it is... But I can only think of one man who would qualify if I didn't," Tsukasa responded. The look he gave Manabu as he picked up his coffee cup to take a sip spoke volumes. The implication stilled Manabu's tongue. No matter how badly Tsukasa wanted him for this "task," he was unable to fulfill that request.

Tsukasa enjoyed the fragrance of the coffee before filling his mouth with the bitter liquid. Upon achieving a certain level of calm, he shifted his gaze to the documents Manabu had flung down and explained, "I was originally hoping to inform Satsuki today, what with you here and all. But she's currently recovering from that trying incident. I think it would be best to put it off another two or three days, don't you?"

This was hardly the type of thing Satsuki would want to hear

while recovering mentally and physically. The news would undoubtedly throw her into emotional turmoil. Not only Tsukasa, but also Manabu, felt it would be best to give her some time.

Manabu shifted his gaze, following Tsukasa's eyes to the documents on the table. They were profiles for four young men with sound positions and promising futures. They were background checks for Satsuki's "marriage candidates."

"Satsuki's eighteenth birthday...is essentially a matchmaking party..."

"**FROM** the looks of it, Father is planning some amazing entertainment for my eighteenth birthday." Satsuki forced herself to smile brightly as she said that to Miharu, her heart sinking under the oppressive feelings she felt. "He's been asking Manabu for advice about it for a while now. Have you heard anything, Miharu? I'm dying of curiosity!"

"Manabu? I had no idea he was giving input on anything like that," Miharu answered. She returned the teacup she was holding to the table. With the fingertips of her right hand pressed against her lips, she mused, "I wonder what it could be. It's unusual for him to keep something from me. I'll be sure to pry it out of him later!"

"Let me know what it is when you do," Satsuki said with a giggle in response to Miharu's bold determination. Then she leaned toward the slightly older woman like she did when she wanted something and demanded, "And you simply must come to my birthday party this year. Promise you will!"

"Of course I will! I can't wait to see what Manabu and Mr. Tsujikawa have up their sleeves," Miharu promised.

"You weren't able to make it last year, so you *absolutely* must come this year, okay?" Satsuki insisted. She dipped her head as she said the word "absolutely" for extra emphasis. Satsuki's childish form of begging was so adorable, Miharu couldn't wipe the grin off her face.

"I'll come no matter what! But the only reason I didn't go last year was because you told me not to, remember?" Miharu reminded her. She drew closer to Satsuki, scooting her chair next to the bed as she did.

"You and Manabu were new to your jobs last year, so I was afraid you'd be too busy..." Satsuki grumbled.

Neither Manabu nor Miharu attended Satsuki's seventeenth birthday party almost a year ago. Upon graduating from university, they both began working at the Hayama Group's main company, Hayama Pharmaceuticals. Manabu became the managing director while Miharu became his secretary. Their hectic schedules made

typical new employees look like they had it easy. That was why Satsuki told them “Please don’t come” when she handed over their invitations.

If she invited them without saying that, she knew they would take time out of their busy schedules to attend the party. As new employees, it was an important period for them. Satsuki wanted the two to put all of their attention into their work. She was a little disappointed there was no sign of either at the party venue on the big day, but Shindo softened the emptiness inside by staying with her the whole time.

As she indulged in memories of last year’s birthday party, Satsuki looked up at Shindo somewhat awkwardly. After the party, she stayed in Shindo’s room well past bedtime and let him pamper her. She remembered how he cradled her in his lap and they split a cookie.

Maybe I’ll sneak into his room this year, too... She could just see Shindo angrily scold her “Now that you’re eighteen, it’s inappropriate to simply waltz into a man’s room!” *Not that I’d mind a scolding if it came from him...*

Shindo was puzzled to find Satsuki looking at him bemusedly, but her expression was so adorable, he couldn’t help but smile. In the middle of enjoying the moment, Shindo noticed a knock come from the sitting room door. Still smiling, he offered the ladies a bow before stepping out of the bedroom.

Satsuki could hear the sound of the sitting room door open followed by Manabu’s voice offering salutations.

“Ah, it’s Manabu! He certainly took long enough!” Miharu fumed, but the inflection of her voice bounced with joy. A moment later, the man who put the pep in her voice entered the room.

“Hello, Satsuki. It’s a pleasure to see you,” he greeted.

“The pleasure is all mine, Manabu.”

As he returned Satsuki’s greeting with a smile, Manabu swept behind his fiancée sitting at her bedside. He rested both hands upon Miharu’s shoulders.



“Sorry I kept you waiting, Miharu,” he apologized.

“You sure took your sweet time, Manabu!” she snarled.

“Sorry. It took a bit longer than expected. Are you mad?”

“Don’t you think it’s rude to keep Satsuki waiting when we came to see her? You said it’d only take half an hour, and the poor dear had to wait a solid hour!” Miharu snapped.

At this, Manabu bent around Miharu, bringing his face before hers. Absolutely indifferent to the fact Satsuki was right in front of them, he lightly pecked her lips like a little bird. “Cheer up, for me.”

“Fine, I’m over it,” Miharu conceded as she stole a glance at Manabu over her shoulders with slightly rosy cheeks.

Watching the spectacle they put on, Satsuki smiled wryly. “What do you think you’re doing in front of an innocent single bachelorette?!” Satsuki asked in a somewhat snarky tone, but she knew this was how these two always behaved.

Copying Satsuki, Manabu shot back in a slightly snarky tone of his own, “Funny, coming from the girl who makes out with Mr. Shindo in front of anyone and everyone!”

“I do not!” Satsuki protested.

“Really? As I recall, you didn’t mind asking him to carry you in public all that long ago. Isn’t that right, Mr. Shindo?” Manabu asked, turning toward Shindo as he brought another chair into the room.

Unable to follow the conversation after stepping out of the room, Shindo was at a complete loss. “Isn’t what right?” he asked for clarification, but Manabu simply laughed, not bothering to elaborate.

Shindo barked a dry chuckle. Apparently, this was one of those days where people were having fun talking about him behind his back.

“Master Manabu, if I may assist you—” Shindo began to offer, placing the chair next to Miharu, but Manabu held his hand up apologetically, cutting him short.

“Thank you, but we really must be going. As it is, we’ve already kept Satsuki up for an hour. I’m sure she must be exhausted. I’ll drop by some other day.”

“I’m fine! You don’t need to worry about me, Manabu,” Satsuki asserted.

Manabu shook his head and tapped Miharu’s shoulders to prompt her to stand up. “I’m afraid I can’t stay. You need to rest up and get well soon.”

“And then will you come visit me again?”

“Yes, I’ll be back soon. Think along the lines of two or three days...” Manabu snuck a sidelong glance at Shindo, who was trying to keep the chairs out of the way by pushing them against the wall. “...There is something important I need to discuss with you.”

“**WOULD** you like me to bring you something to drink?” Shindo asked Satsuki after he returned from escorting Manabu and Miharu to the entrance hall on her behalf. Miharu graciously said she didn’t need to see them out, so Satsuki bade them farewell from the perch on her bed.

“Would you like something cold? Or would you like to treat yourself to a carbonated beverage?” he asked, standing at her side. Concerned for how long she had been sitting up, he slipped his hand behind her back for support.

Satsuki grew increasingly frustrated as she watched Shindo wait patiently for her to reply. Finally she snapped, “I don’t want you to treat me like I’m sick, too. It’s not like I got hurt or anything.”

“But I believe you were gravely wounded...in the heart...” Shindo replied.

At a loss for words, Satsuki turned away. Her body was unharmed, excluding the hickeys on her neck. However, her heart and mind sustained terrible wounds.

Coming into contact with the fundamental nature of the beasts known as “humans” was rattling. It made her lose all control of her powers. Her heart flew into an unstoppable frenzy. All of this combined to bring about a cold, hard reality that could never be undone.

“Shindo...” Satsuki whimpered and clutched onto the same side of the blazer’s lapel as the hand he was using to support her. She looked up at him and continued, “...I want to go outside for some fresh air.”

“To the veranda?” he asked.

“To the greenhouse.”

“I can’t take you there.” It was unusual for him to reject one of her requests. Slightly leaning over, he peered into her eyes as he explained, “You are currently on bed rest, or at least that’s the cover story. Even though the greenhouse is on our property, it’s still outside the mansion. We can’t afford to run the risk of anyone seeing you up and about.”

“You’re no fun,” Satsuki grumbled with a pout. “I want to visit the greenhouse. Shindo, figure something out!”

Satsuki pursed her lips angrily. This pouty face was reserved just for Shindo. He was so happy to see her make that face for him, he couldn’t help but chuckle.

At the sound of his chuckle, Satsuki’s face instantly lit up. “Ah, I made you laugh! That means you’ll take me there, doesn’t it? You’re going to take me to the greenhouse, aren’t you?”

Satsuki was overjoyed to see Shindo laugh. These past few days,

it felt as though she had only seen him act solemn out of concern for her. To be fair, he only treated her as gently as if she might break due to her listless brooding. The greatest comfort to Satsuki's heart was none other than Shindo and the smile he reserved for her, but he kept that very smile tucked away in his attempt to console her.

Shrugging his shoulders in mildly bemused defeat, he dropped to both knees. "Very well, but you'll have to wait a while before I can. If you rest all morning, I'll say you're feeling better and take you outside. We'll go under that pretext."

"We can't go now?" Satsuki pouted.

"Your guests just left. I can't let you wander around outside your room when you should be exhausted from entertaining company," he explained.

Satsuki's shoulders slumped in disappointment, but she was willing to accept this compromise. "Fair enough, but we absolutely must go this afternoon."

"Of course," Shindo replied with a satisfied smile, glad that Satsuki came around, albeit reluctantly. "In the meantime, I'm afraid you'll have to be satisfied with the veranda. I'm going to grab something light for you to wear over that, so if you'll excuse me," he said and began to step away from the bed.

A tug on the hem of his blazer brought him to a stop. Naturally, it was none other than Satsuki who tugged at his blazer. Shindo turned to look at her, his head tilted inquisitively as he wondered, *What does she want? What silly little request has she thought up next?*

"What is the matter, Miss?"

It was no wonder those words flew from his lips. Satsuki looked up at him with eyes filled with fear and trepidation. "Shindo...I want you to tell me something."

Seeing the serious look on her face, Shindo thought better of leaving and turned to face her properly. "Anything." He would answer whatever plagued his mistress. That was, after all, part of his job.

Satsuki released her hold on the hem of his blazer and shifted her eyes away from him. Staring fixedly at hands folded over the blanket pulled up to her waist, she began, "You see...I've been thinking a great deal these past few days..."

Ever since the incident, Satsuki would fall deep into reverie if left alone. The events of that day replayed in her memory one after the next, from how her heart fell into chaos to how she lost control of her powers.

Satsuki's mind was assaulted with the hateful words of someone confronted by her abnormal powers. *Monster!* he cried in her mind, the word piercing her heart. But this wasn't a first.

I was repeating the events of the past, Satsuki realized.

“There was another instance in the past when I was unable to control my powers, wasn’t there?” she quietly asked. Shindo’s hand twitched noticeably, but Satsuki kept going. “This wasn’t the first time I killed someone with my powers, was it?”

She tilted her head toward Shindo and gazed into eyes drawn wide in surprise—an unusual expression for him.

“And the one who made me forget was you...” she finished. The melancholic past was trying to resurface and overcome the block on the memories presumed lost in the depths of her mind...

“**DID** you read my mind...?” Shindo breathed, his brows slightly furrowed. Despite his best efforts to sound calm, his voice trembled.

“No...” Satsuki answered with a slight shake of her head. She peered at him with the same intelligent and inquisitive eyes that he always found irresistibly captivating. “I remembered during the *incident*... There was another person who rejected my powers... He also called me a ‘monster.’”

“You don’t need to remember that!” Shindo suddenly raised his voice. He stooped over and scooped up Satsuki’s hands. He held her hands gently as he begged in earnest, “You don’t need to remember any of that! Why would you want to? Even if you did, this isn’t the sort of thing that will guide your heart down the path to recovery! Why would you want to remember?!”

“Because I want to know... Please tell me, Shindo.” She leaned forward, drawing closer to Shindo. “What did I do? ...Who did I kill? How did you make me forget about it all this time? ...Tell me! Please!”

“You’re better off not knowing!”

“Shindo!”

Shindo refused to let her know the truth, but Satsuki wasn’t about to back down. She flung her clasped hands towards his chest and pulled closer as if to unleash a verbal lashing. She demanded, “If I order you, will you tell me then?! Will you tell me if I order you to as your mistress?!”

For a retainer such as Shindo, an order issued by his mistress—by Satsuki—demanded absolute obedience. If his little lady ordered him to talk, he had no choice but to tell her. Even so, Shindo refused to acquiesce. For her sake, there were some orders he could not obey.

“I cannot obey that order, Miss!” he cried.

He took Satsuki’s hands firmly pressed against his chest and pushed them back toward her. She must’ve been pushing with greater force than he realized, for the moment he pushed back, her whole body rocked backward as if shoved. He tried to pull her forward to keep her from falling, but lost balance in doing so.

“Miss...!”

Shindo frantically let go of her hands and wrapped his arms around her shoulders to provide more support in a vain attempt to keep her upright. But having lost balance himself, far from keeping Satsuki from falling, he collapsed onto the bed with her clutched to his bosom!

Perhaps their violent collapse onto the bed was to blame. The vase decorating the nightstand fell over with a loud crash, spilling Miharu's beautifully arranged ivory roses along with water across the floor.

"I'm terribly sorry! Did I hurt you?!" Shindo fretted. Accident or not, a full-grown man just fell on top of Satsuki! He was afraid he hurt her. Afraid he caused her pain... Shindo was sick with worry as he started to get up, but Satsuki latched onto his arms.

"Come..." she whispered in a tiny voice, pulling him toward her. "Come...Shindo..." Satsuki pressed her hands against his cheeks, slowly drawing his face before hers.

Their faces drew so close, Shindo could feel Satsuki's breath. She looked into the depths of his gray-tinged dark eyes with her piercing eyes that could see through anything.

"...Shindo..." she said in a melancholic voice that echoed sweetly in his ears.

"Miss..."

"Tell me..." Satsuki commanded with closed eyes. With a bump...she pressed her forehead against his. "Tell me...Shindo."

As if Shindo were disclosing all, scenes played before Satsuki like a movie... A single memory flowed into her mind. She had begun searching through Shindo's memories...

"**DO** you seriously intend to pull Mr. Shindo away from Satsuki?" Tsubaki Tsujikawa asked, gently laying her slender, lily-white fingers along the shoulders of her husband, Tsukasa.

"Hmph, so what if I do? I don't have your seal of approval?" he probed.

"Not at all," Tsubaki answered without a moment of hesitation. It was a truly crisp answer.

Tsukasa's wife, Tsubaki, was probably the only person in the whole world capable of barking her disapproval at him without batting an eye. Tsukasa put the stack of documents he was holding down on his lap and placed his hand over the one his beloved wife rested on his shoulder.

"This is best for Satsuki, and for the Tsujikawa line in turn. Can't you see that?" he cajoled.

"I fail to see how this is best for Satsuki," she replied. Known as "Princess Camellia" for her beauty since her youth, Tsubaki's

attractive face grew dark as she glared angrily at Tsukasa. "I'll admit finding a fiancé for her is important for the Tsujikawa legacy. After all, Satsuki is our only child. If she doesn't get married and produce an heir, the Tsujikawa name will end with her."

Phew! Thank goodness the woman sees reason, Tsukasa thought as he nodded in satisfaction. Releasing his wife's hand, he reached out for the cigar case on top of the table.

"Having said that, I don't approve of separating her from Mr. Shindo," his wife persisted. His hand fell short of the cigar case at the sound of her repeated disapproval.

"If you try to take him from her now, I have no doubt she'll make the same mistake she did all those years ago," Tsubaki insisted, making Tsukasa frown in consternation. "As it is, the incident from the other day is still too fresh..."

Tsubaki recalled the report she received from Shindo regarding the incident at school. It said Satsuki lost control of her powers and accidentally killed someone. It was heartrending for her as a mother. She was agonized by her daughter's pain, feeling it as if it were her own.

"If what happened back then were to happen again, she would lose her grasp on sanity... She will commit another crime so she 'doesn't lose Shindo'! Do you want to make her repeat the mistakes of the past?!" Tsubaki shouted in warning.

"MISS..."

"Silence," Satsuki snapped. She searched his mind with his head sandwiched between her hands and her forehead pressed against his.

The corners of Shindo's eyes twitched. The inside of his head throbbed with terrible spasms of pain accompanied by ringing in his ears. Along with the pain, fear and anxiety filled his heart.

Oh, God! Please tell me she isn't...

"Miss..."

"Be quiet!" Satsuki commanded as she tried to delve through Shindo's memories. Realizing what she was doing, Shindo tried to stop her, but Satsuki quickly issued orders that defeated his efforts.

"Tell...me..." with each word she uttered, a waft of Satsuki's warm breath embraced Shindo. Her face was so close, he could feel the warmth emanating from it. Their foreheads were pressed together. The texture and warmth of Satsuki's soft hands pressed against his cheeks helped him forget the unpleasant sensation of her searching his mind.

This isn't good! I can't let her find out. That incident was... Shindo tried to pull away from Satsuki, but his body wouldn't so much as budge. It wasn't as though Satsuki's orders kept him from moving. He

was actively trying to move, but it was as if the surrounding air held him bound, forbidding the slightest movement.

Miss...? Shindo stared in shock at Satsuki's face held terribly close to his own. His gaze was fixed on her closed eyes. *Are you preventing me from moving...?*

It wasn't as though Satsuki was applying much pressure with her hands. Nevertheless, he had no doubt in his mind she was the one robbing him of the ability to move. She was relying on her powers to bind him...

"Miss..." Shindo gasped. His mind felt as though pins and needles were prickling at it. Was someone searching through memories—through the mind—supposed to be this unpleasant? Even with Satsuki working to make it more bearable, it was still an indescribably strange sensation.

That sensation brought back a certain memory for Shindo. A memory from long, long ago. *That happened...when the Miss was four, and I was sixteen.*

"Stay with me...forever..."

The flashback played in his mind! Fragments of the memory rolled into frames that played like a movie one after the next, making him remember with vivid clarity.

I...must never remember this moment. It was the very memory Satsuki was searching for and "reading" right this very minute.

"Miss! Don't!" Shindo shouted, shaking off the feeling he could collapse from mental fatigue!

Satsuki's eyes flung wide open. Betraying a hint of surprise, her eyes pierced into the depths of Shindo's gray-tinged eyes!

"Shindo..." she said in a trembling voice. "...Shindo..."

She slowly narrowed her wide eyes, revealing her sadness. Shindo was still unable to move.

"I'm sorry...Shindo," Satsuki apologized in a meek voice, her eyes growing misty. Enchanted by her and unable to turn away, all he could do was gaze back at her. "I'm sorry..." It was only a matter of time before the tears began to spill down her cheeks.

Satsuki absolutely never used her powers on Shindo. Even when the door to her heart popped open, she never actively tried to read his mind. Ever since she was little, Shindo strictly forbid Satsuki to use her powers in daily life or on those she held dear. This also served as a means to prevent Satsuki from dwelling on the fact that she possessed supernatural powers.

Satsuki mostly obeyed those rules throughout the years. There were times she broke them in innocent mischief and play, only to earn a sound scolding. But now she went so far as to break those ironclad rules and paralyze Shindo in order to draw this memory from the

person she trusted more than anyone. The memory was so overwhelming it made tears cascade down her cheeks as it wrenched at her heart.

"I..." Satsuki choked, tears streaming down the corner of her eyes. "I killed someone you held dear, didn't I...?"

THE wisteria flowers danced. Their petals fluttered in Satsuki and Shindo's memory. In the midst of the dancing petals, there was a wisp of a little girl and a young man. The little girl was playing with the flower petals beneath the trellis of wisteria. The young man watched over her as she played.

"Stay with me forever, please," the girl said.

It was a promise sworn under the trellis. Pinky finger twined with pinky finger. This promise would bind the two forever... To think Satsuki was only four and Shindo was sixteen at the time.

"Certainly, Miss," Shindo swore. The moment he gave that reply, their "eternal promise" was forged.

They would be together forever and ever. Neither doubted this promise would last until the end of time.

Satsuki was overcome with such great joy, it made her want to dance in the air along with the tumbling wisteria petals. She was with the man who put her mind at ease. The smiles he gave her were kinder than any other, and the hugs he gave her were filled with boundless love. Unlike the love of her parents, the love of this young man made her want to melt. He wormed his way into her heart the very first time she laid eyes on him. And now he was promising to spend the rest of his life with her...

"Don't you belong to me, Shindo?"

"But of course," he replied. Shindo snapped the book he was reading shut. Slipping his hands between the child's arms planted on the ground from crawling toward him, he lifted her up as easily as if she were a kitten before plopping her on his lap. Once she was on his lap, he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tight. "I will forever be yours."

Held in his embrace, Satsuki happily nuzzled her cheek against his chest.

Rustle...! Just then, the bushes near Shindo began to violently shake. The first to notice, Shindo quickly turned to face the bushes.

"I can't bear to watch another goddamn second of this crap..." came a voice that made all of the blood drain from Shindo's face.

Sensing Shindo's emotional distress, Satsuki cocked her head in the direction of the bushes.

"Yer like a neutered mutt in that spiffy suit with that complacent look smeared across yer mug... And that ain't yer style," a man

sneered as he stepped out from the bushes, glaring at Shindo. "Now is it, kiddo?"

Shindo's lips began to tremble, his eyes open wide. "Pops..." he whispered, but the rustling of the wisteria in the trellis drowned it out...

"NONETHELESS, this is how it must be done..." Tsukasa insisted and reached for his cigar case with the hand that fell short earlier. He pulled out a single cigar. "We were bound to confront this one way or the other when it came time for Satsuki to choose a future spouse. Don't you see that?"

He turned to face his wife, who was standing over his shoulders. She was giving him such a nasty look, he could have sworn she was ready to bite him at any second.

"I'm not upset about your plans to make her pick a future husband. I *am* upset with you for consequentially tearing her away from Mr. Shindo," Tsubaki clarified.

Tsukasa turned away from his outraged wife and sighed, "For Pete's sake!" as he sunk into his chair. Always stubborn as a mule, something about his wife resembled her older brother when she contorted her face into this dangerous snarl.

Tsubaki's brother was Manabu's father. Like an older version of Manabu, the astute president worked alongside his son to steadily build up Hayama Group. Manabu inherited both his talent and skill. Even now, Tsukasa wanted the man renowned the world over as the "Hayama Prodigy" for the Tsujikawas.

If he didn't have a fiancée, Tsukasa could have launched a hostile takeover against the Hayama Group and obtained Manabu that way... However, Tsubaki put an end to that ambition a few years ago, making her warning crystal clear with the threat "If you go after my family, I'll never forgive you."

"I just looked over the files. I'll admit the candidates you've selected for her future grooms seem like fine young men with bright futures from respectable families. But even if she marries one of them, there isn't any need to intentionally separate Satsuki from her retainer, is there?"

"I'll have you know, Tsubaki..." Tsukasa stopped to take a whiff of his cigar before slowly rising to face his wife looming over his shoulders, "...it wasn't my idea to have Mr. Shindo leave her side."

"It wasn't?" she questioned, her stern expression softening slightly. But the next moment, the name she heard made her doubt her own ears.

"It was Manabu."

WISTERIA petals danced within the memory... They fluttered between Satsuki and Shindo... In a curtain of dancing petals, the same scene began to roll before the two.

A breeze blew through the silent greenhouse. It was a draft born from the ventilation system. Yet there was a consciousness that was not Satsuki at work that made the wisteria petals dance up and down around her.

“So that’s the Tsujikawa’s only kid, eh...? She’s just as cute as they say...” said the man who appeared from the bushes, curling the corner of his lips into an unsavory grin. As realization struck, Shindo quickly shifted his position so he was holding her protectively in both arms.

The man was in his fifties. He boasted a robust, muscular build. Although the top of his head was shaved clean, tufts of white could be seen in the overgrown mustache above his lips. The dark lenses of his mirrored sunglasses hid his eyes. But it was easy to imagine that under those glasses, he had eyes as sharp as any weapon.

“She’s the first thing you couldn’t kill.”

Satsuki wasn’t looking at the man who called her a “thing.” Trusting herself to Shindo, she looked up at him as he held onto her with all of his might.

The man chuckled dryly from the back of his throat before continuing, “Did she ensnare ya with her cute charm? Does that little girl satisfy yer itch better than them ‘ladies’ who treated ya real nice back at the hideout? Well? Does she, kiddo?”

“Wha-?!”

“I’ve gotta admit, she is cute. C’mon, lemme have her for a bit. I haven’t done it with a girl this young in ages. It’s cool, ain’t it, kiddo? You and me, we’re pals, ain’t we?” the man persisted. He laughed from the back of the throat, the sound of ridicule in his laughter only growing louder.

Burying Satsuki deep in his chest, Shindo held his arms across the back of her head to cover her ears in hopes of blocking out the man’s voice.

“We aren’t pals...” Shindo whispered at the man. “That relationship came to an end four years ago.”

“Yeah, when you failed to kill that there brat.”

Shindo was raised at a place where humans who “made a living killing people” gathered. He was there as far back as he could remember. He had no idea what either his father or mother looked like... He didn’t even have a name.

The place was a large mansion built like a labyrinth. Countless nameless people with similar backgrounds were also there. The men all called him “kiddo” while the women who hunkered there to

entertain the men referred to him as “boy.”

“Kill to live.” The creed was commonly accepted in this world. He learned this—and more—from this man. Displaying impressive mastery with the knife from an early age, Shindo used his talent to kill his first person at the early age of ten.

The man was greatly pleased with the job he completed then. “I knew you had talent in ya! Ya’ve got the same eyes as yer old man,” he had claimed. Apparently this man was also pals with young Shindo’s father.

It might be fair to say they were close. The man gave more attention to him than the other boys, and taught him a great many things. Shindo had viewed him as a teacher and father figure. Over time, he naturally grew to refer to him as “Pops.”

“I thought you were dead,” he said, walking slowly—pausing between each step—toward Shindo. “Right after you failed to come back four years ago, the politician who hired us to kill this munchkin died in an accident. The damn thing smelled freakin’ fishy. Rumor among our kind had it Big Man Tsujikawa pulled some strings to make it happen.”

With Satsuki in his arms, Shindo inched back as if hoping to escape the man who gradually drew closer.

“I can’t help if the client up and croaked on us. What with you missin’ and rumors that the brat was just fine, we decided this whole deal was a bust.”

Shindo’s back hit the trellis lattice, preventing him from edging back. The man came to a halt before Shindo and glared down at the young man.

“I never dreamed the Tsujikawas had ya tucked away, alive and kickin’!” the man snarled. He suddenly grabbed Shindo by the arms. Utilizing his incredible strength, he broke Shindo’s protective hold on Satsuki. She was huddled in the crevice of his arms like a small animal as the man grabbed her by the scruff of her dress, lifting her up as easily as if she were a kitten.

“Miss!” Shindo cried.

“...Shin...do...!” she whimpered in pain with both hands clutching at the suffocating collar of her dress.

She was being held by the back of her dress’s collar. The only thing supporting the weight of Satsuki’s body was the material of her clothing. And that was cutting against her neck. She was trapped in a suffocating position. It was too much for any four-year-old to bear.

“Miss!” Shindo shouted.

He jumped up and began to lunge at the man in hopes of snatching Satsuki back. But before he could launch his attack, the man caught Shindo in mid-stride with one hand and lifted him off the

ground!

“You’ve gotten damn big for yer breeches if ya think you can attack me...kiddo,” the man goaded.

Although Shindo was only sixteen, he was nearly 5’11” and began formal unarmed combat training once he became Satsuki’s retainer. In Aikido, he was already able to fight on par with the Master Instructor. But none of the skills he honed were of any help to him now.

The man tightened his clutch around Shindo’s neck, cutting off airflow. Shindo clasped both hands around the man’s arm.

“Why don’t I go ahead and kill ya here and now...? I don’t got no use for a dull-eyed sap.”

Caught in the man’s grasp, Shindo looked at Satsuki from the corner of his eye. She was dangling beside him from the man’s other arm. Her neck was bent awkwardly despite her hands pulling at the collar of her dress. Her mouth opened and closed slightly, unable to voice the word, “...Shin...do...” But the wisteria petals flying erratically around Satsuki conveyed what she was trying to say.

“Shin...do...” The word uttered from lips as little and adorable as flower petals was none other than his name. They weren’t words beseeching help or any other imaginable possibility. It was the name she gave him. “...Shindo...”

“Miss...!”

Shindo put all of his strength into his clasp on the man’s arm. Whipping his body around, he landed such a powerful kick on the man’s torso that it sent him tumbling away! Caught by surprise, the man released his hold on Shindo. While he was stumbling off balance, he made the mistake of accidentally popping open the hand used to hold Satsuki.

“Miss!”

Once Shindo was on solid ground after breaking free of the man’s grasp, he dashed toward Satsuki, falling from the man’s outstretched hand. He managed to catch her before she struck the ground, but wound up sliding across the grass as a result. At least he was able to catch her safely in his arms, successfully preventing so much as a single strand of hair from crashing to the ground.

“Miss...are you...all right?” Shindo asked, his voice hoarse from being strangled. He was on the verge of hypoxia, but oxygen was reaching his brain once more, giving him a mild headache.

“Shin...do...” Satsuki whimpered, slightly out of breath. Her beautiful eyes that could make his heart melt were brimming with tears. Each time the name she gave him left her trembling lips, Shindo’s chest grew painfully tight.

There was a time when all he knew was how to steal, including

human lives. Without a name, no one would notice or care when or where he died like a dog.

But then this little girl taught him the meaning and joy of living and protecting another. The girl gave him a name. The more he tried to protect her, the more she filled him with kindness and peace.

“Miss...” he croaked. *If I never met you...I wouldn't be alive today.*

“Shin...do...” Satsuki said in a slightly stronger voice as she held her hands up to his cheeks. “You won't leave me...will you...?”

Rustle...! There was no breeze, yet right at that moment, the wisteria flowers began to stir.

“Stay by my side, okay...?” They had promised one another as much only moments before. She repeated it sadly as if ensuring it still stood. “...That man wants to take you away...”

“What?”

After hearing Satsuki's warning, Shindo sensed the desire to kill and leaned backwards! Along with the sound of knocking on wood, a small dual-bladed knife stabbed the base of the tree next to him! If Shindo didn't lean back, the knife would have struck him clean in the head.

“At least ya've still got yer wits about ya,” the man said with three more knives in one hand. He might've stumbled, but he never did fall.

“I was originally gonna put an end to yer sorry existence, but...” The man readjusted his hold on one of the knives and threw it at Shindo with a whip of the arm!

Shindo smoothly rolled to dodge the throwing knife with Satsuki held tightly in his arms! Against this man, the best he could do was dodge. Even if he tried to launch an attack, he knew he didn't stand a chance from the physical punishment he'd taken throughout the twelve years he was raised by the man.

But...at least I have to protect the Miss... I don't care if I die as long as I protect her... That's good enough... Shindo glared at the man. The killer chortled happily the moment Shindo's determined eyes fell on him.

“Come back, kiddo,” the man invited. He swung the two remaining knives around in his hand before they disappeared into his jacket. His eyes behind the mirrored sunglasses looked happily upon the boy glaring daggers at him. “I like those eyes. Ya haven't totally lost the old glint. It's not too late. Come back, kiddo.”

“No...”

“You don't belong here. The clean air'll rot yer brain if ya stick 'round too long.”

“I'm not going...” Shindo refused.

“Us bastards raised 'round the stench of blood can only meet

violent ends. Don't get any stupid ideas 'bout goin' clean after all the shit ya've done. Yer sixteen now, ain't ya? All 'em sweethearts who used to play with ya will treat ya real good. As a man this time, not as their toy."

"I'm not going!"

The man's lips curled into a vulgar grin and his voice dripped with boundless sarcasm. The stronger Shindo rejected his offer out of growing anger, the more violently the man's shoulder's trembled from suppressed laughter.

Thud...! Satsuki jerked violently in his arms. Dropping his gaze to the child, Shindo saw her eyes were flung wide open and her entire body was beginning to tremble.

"Miss?"

"You can't have him..." Satsuki hissed, looking at the man from the safety of Shindo's embrace. "You can't..."

Rustle! Swish! There was no breeze in the greenhouse, yet the wisteria, surrounding trees, plants, and flowers all swayed to and fro as violently as if there were a storm!

"Shindo...belongs to me..."

"What the hell?" the man exclaimed, a dubious expression painted on his face as he looked around. There was only a slight artificial draft blowing through the greenhouse, yet the plants were thrashing as wildly as if there were mighty winds.

Rustle! Swish! Crackle...!

The man couldn't feel any wind against his body, but there was undeniably some form of pressure like a strong wind blowing through the greenhouse. Even Shindo with Satsuki in his arms—not just the man—spun full circle to take it all in.

This was the first time Shindo ever saw the plant life in the greenhouse throw such a fit. With Satsuki tucked in his embrace, he found himself wrapping his arms around her even tighter. The fact that she was the one disrupting the trees and plants didn't escape him.

Satsuki's body felt abnormally hot. It was akin to the fevers she ran when she caught a cold. Her temperature was obviously climbing at a tremendous rate.

"I won't...let you take...Shindo..." she muttered as if delirious from the fever. But the moment the words were out of her mouth, Shindo's arms were struck numb!

He was so surprised, it made him loosen his hold on her. The numbness in his arms didn't feel like the pins-and-needles of poor circulation, but an electric shock. This was the type of numbness felt when electricity ran through the body. If he had to compare it to something, the closest thing he could think of was when he got zapped by a stun gun.

“Shindo...belongs to me...!” Satsuki repeated.

Zap!

“Whoa!” Shindo’s arms flew away from Satsuki as if he were being repelled! Electricity coursed through the girl’s body! His arms were repelled from her.

Rustle! Swoosh...! The trees, flowers, and bushes swayed violently.

Satsuki pulled away from Shindo’s limp arms and slowly...rose.

“You can’t take him away...” She slowly began to walk. The man stared silently at the approaching little girl. “You can’t take him away!”

Bang! The moment Satsuki shouted, the man’s sunglasses shattered to pieces and crumbled off his face! Beneath the crumbled sunglasses revealed cold, brutal eyes. Those eyes glared intently at the girl closing in on him.

“Miss!” Shindo shouted as he jumped to his feet. He tried to stop Satsuki, but soon learned the futility of his efforts.

He couldn’t get near her. If he tried to reach out to Satsuki, his fingers would come in contact with the same electric currents that repelled his arms earlier. A curtain of electricity was draped around her. Or perhaps she was creating the electric barrier around herself.

“Miss...”

Shindo had never seen Satsuki like this before. He had never seen anything like this! Although he had seen her play with the plants and flowers or creating a gentle breeze, he’d never once seen her unleash a protective invisible electric field in a rage.

“What...is Shindo to you? You have no right to take my Divine Wisteria...” Satsuki lashed out. The electric whirlwind emanating from her made the child’s beautifully long, jet-black hair whip in the air. In this windless greenhouse, it posed a strange sight to behold.

“Be gone!” Satsuki shouted in a voice with unconcealed rage that Shindo had never before heard. The moment the words left her mouth, the man’s massive body was tossed like a ragdoll against one of the trees behind him! The tree creaked loudly as it bent against the impact of his muscular body.

“...Ngh...!” the man groaned. His entire body spasmed before slowly collapsing to the ground. The pain of crashing into a massive tree wasn’t the only source of his suffering. His muscles felt like jelly as if someone just tasered him.

“Leave! Don’t take Shindo from me!” Satsuki screamed.

Lightning. If there was any word to describe this, it would be “lightning.” A flash suddenly crashed down upon the man’s head!

Boom! There was a deep, massive crash! Following that blinding light and boom, the great tree behind the man split in half!

“Miss!”

Shindo was terrified that if Satsuki kept this up, she might do something irredeemable... Spurred by his sense of dread, Shindo desperately reached out to Satsuki! But each time his hands drew near, the electricity racing through the air around her kept him back. Not even Shindo could touch Satsuki now.

“Miss! Please stop! Don’t do this!” he cried out.

The man was lying on his stomach by the tree struck by the lightning-like flash. His body began to twitch as he slowly pushed himself to his elbows. The moment he was up, red blood began to pitter-patter off his body in big droplets. His open mouth stood out as a crack against the flesh of his charred head. But that didn’t stop the man from glaring balefully at Satsuki as he guessed, “...Yer...psychic...?”

The man shifted his menacing glare to the young man behind Satsuki; his face twisted into a scornful grin. “You’ve fallen...into the hands of a...terrifying creature...kiddo...”

The greenhouse was perfectly still. The man’s weak voice came out no more than a whisper, yet it nonetheless road on the breeze to reach Shindo and Satsuki’s ears.

“...Yer gonna...die... That monster’s gonna kill ya...”

“...” Shindo gasped, his body recoiling. The weight of the word “monster” drove his body down with tremendous weight.

“...Return to our hideout...kiddo...if ya wanna live...” the man continued.

Shindo’s gaping eyes were glued to the man who was looking beyond Satsuki to gaze upon him. This was the man who looked after him when he was no better than a stray dog. There were times he yelled and hit Shindo, even beating him within an inch of his life. But recognizing Shindo’s potential, he looked after and cared for him more than anyone else.

This was the man who once said, “I’ll keep ya under my wing till ya can fend fer yerself.”

Those days were filled with nothing but competition and rivalry with the other boys Shindo’s age. Caught in that drudgery, the man would drop by every now and then to tell stories of his own youth. Back then, Shindo felt that was the only time he could “breathe naturally.” He truly viewed the man as a father...

“If ya stay with that brat...ya’ll...die...” the man warned.

“...Pops...”

Whether the man’s words were spoken out of concern or as a threat, not even Shindo could say for certain. But he knew that the man was the one and only person who took any interest in his future back in that hellhole.

“Miss! Please stop already! Miss!” Shindo shouted. But it was already too late...

“Gaaaaaaah!” The man screamed as his body jumped up, his chest thrust outward. With his hands clutching at his head, his red mouth agape, it was clear the man didn’t rise of his own volition.

“...Gah...!Hah...! ...Gah...!” The noises akin to a tongue-twister never made it out of his lips.

Surrounded by sparks, the man shook from electric shock. The electric current flowing through him was a high enough voltage it threatened to burn his body to a crisp. This electric shock forced his broken body to its feet when he was unable to rise of his own volition.

“Pops...” Shindo uttered in a horrified whisper. His face blanched with terror, he was unable to peel his eyes from the nightmarish sight. By age twelve, he had seen people die more times than he cared to remember. It was a common sight for him back then. But had he ever seen such a cruel and unusual death? It was hard to believe such death could be brought by the hands of...

“Show me everything,” Satsuki commanded, glaring with narrowed eyes at the man whose body jolted violently from electrocution, making red blood gush from his head. “Show me everything you know about Shindo...”

At that moment, it dawned upon Shindo. What if Satsuki was trying to read this man’s mind to see his memories? What if she was tearing through his mind in search of memories about Shindo to uncover all he knew?

“Miss...” Shindo whispered as he gazed upon Satsuki, unable to draw near her, let alone touch her.

A vortex of electricity swirled around Satsuki. Sparks flashed throughout the energy waves emanating from her. Even Shindo could tell she was approaching her limit for her to be on the verge of combustion.

Satsuki’s pitch-black hair drifted with the swirls in the electric currents. The hem of her dress billowed as if she were standing in the midst of a mighty gale.

“I won’t give Shindo...to anyone...” she declared. He swore to stay with her forever. He promised to stay at her side.

This was the boy Satsuki chose when she was still a newborn baby. What was so special about him? What made Satsuki choose him? In truth, Satsuki no longer knew the answer herself. The only thing she knew for certain now...

“Don’t take Shindo from me!” she screamed.

...was that if she lost him, she would most likely lose sight of herself!

The man’s body rocked wildly! Upon reaching a boil, his blood

began to rapidly bubble through the wounds across his head. Neither consciousness nor life still held their grip on the man, yet Satsuki continued to lash out her powers. She was unable to rein them in. The electric currents surrounding her flashed sparks, whipping her hair wildly to and fro.

“Miss!” Shindo cried out. *What should I do? How can I stop the Miss?!*

The man had been reduced to a lifeless thing. Raised under his wing, he was the one person Shindo went so far as to call “Pops.” Even though his life was spent, the powers emitting from Satsuki made his body continue to convulse. It was as if he were her marionette.

In the face of this limitless discharge of power, an unthinkable possibility passed through Shindo’s mind. If Satsuki’s powers continue to go out of control, won’t they ultimately burn her out? What would happen to a psychic that unleashed their power without control?

I won’t let that happen... The Miss chose me to protect her... She saved me from that living hell and spared my life. Her life must never be put in harm’s way!

“Miss!” he screamed like a madman. His heart was filled with only one desire, much like when he was in danger of dying at the hands of the man. *I don’t care what happens to me! Not as long as I save the Miss!*

Shindo plunged into the currents swirling around Satsuki. Pulling her toward his chest from behind, he gave her a great hug!



“Miss! Please stop!” Shindo pleaded. It felt as if the electricity crashed down on the crown of his head before surging through his body. Despite fighting to remain conscious, he refused to release his hold around Satsuki’s hot body on the verge of bursting into flames.

“...Miss...” he wheezed, his voice not wanting to come out. But Shindo only held Satsuki tighter, pressing her head against his chest. He stroked her hair as he did when she was a baby.

“Shindo...” Satsuki said gently. As if taking that voice as a sign, the electric currents around Satsuki showed signs of ebbing. Peace and calm gradually returned to their surroundings.

“Shindo...” came the sound of Satsuki’s calm voice. Held in the embrace Shindo fought desperately to win, she rubbed her cheek against his chest and happily whispered, “Stay with me...Shindo...”

“Miss...”

“Stay with me...forever...” she whispered.

With Satsuki in his arms, Shindo raised his head. His eyes fell upon the man reduced to nothing more than a lump of mass by Satsuki’s powers. Her powers took his life, leaving just a corpse.

“Miss...” Shindo whispered. As he fervently stroked her hair, he was surprised at himself for nearly bursting into sobs, something he had never done in all his sixteen years of life.

Why must the Miss be put through this? Why does she have these awful powers?! The more such thoughts raced through his mind, the more an emotion unknown to him filled his heart: sadness.

“Shindo...” Satsuki gently called out to him as he fell into sadness.

Shindo looked down at her and gasped. Satsuki was crying. She was looking up at him, tears filling eyes as clear and intelligent as ever.

“Shindo...you’ve had a hard life, haven’t you...?”

“Miss...”

“Shindo...” she repeated, beautiful, clear tears streaming from her eyes. Those eyes gazed into Shindo’s gray-tinted eyes, piercing to their inner depths. It was just like how he was drawn to her eyes and mesmerized by them when he first met her as a month-old infant. They held him paralyzed.

Shindo slowly dropped to his knees on the grass as he peered into Satsuki’s eyes and she into his. Helping Satsuki to her feet, their eyes locked at the same level.

“Shindo...” Satsuki reached her hand out to gently brush Shindo’s cheek. “You’ve endured...so many hardships...”

The tears she shed were not for herself, but for Shindo. Satsuki read the man’s mind, uncovering all of his memories concerning Shindo. It showed his past. His past as a nameless boy before he met

her pierced her heart with agony.

The sight filled Shindo with pain too great to bear. He never wanted Satsuki to know. All she needed to know...was that he was originally a shady character without a name who came to kill her. She didn't need to know that he was raised in an environment no better than a cesspool, that he was taught the obscenest way of life, or that it was necessary to put those lessons to use in order to survive. He thought nothing of it when women reduced to animals made him their plaything.

Shindo didn't want Satsuki to learn that side of him ever existed. Not her...not the child as pure as an angel who saved him. She was the one person...he didn't want to find out...

But even upon learning Shindo's past, Satsuki did not look down on him with contempt. Instead she shed tears on his behalf. And here she had every right to cry for herself after just killing a man with the abnormal powers contained within her body. The man's horrific death was etched into her eyes, yet instead of bemoaning her own lot in life, she offered words of sympathy for Shindo.

"It must have been awful... I feel for you...Shindo..."

Shindo could feel warmth emanating from Satsuki's hands pressed against his cheeks. That warmth cleansed his heart of the remorse and disgrace that tainted it.

"Are you crying...?" Shindo asked as he gently cupped his hands over hers. "Are you crying for me?"

He felt as though he could lose himself in her eyes. He was seized by the illusion that simply bathing in her gaze alone could purify him.

"Miss..." he said as he gave her hands a squeeze. "Please forget..."

Rustle... The trees shook. As if whipped around by mighty winds, their leaves blew off as they thrashed about.

"If...you feel any pity...or compassion for me...please forget everything that happened here today..." Shindo continued.

Whoosh! Rustle...! Almost as if they were moving with a mind of their own, the fallen leaves piled on top of the remains to conceal the hideous corpse.

"Forget that you used your powers to render this person into a pile of flesh..." Shindo requested.

Once the tree leaves fully covered the body, wisteria petals quietly began whirling up from the earth.

"And forget...my past..." he finished.

As if trying to comfort Satsuki, the whirl of wisteria petals fluttered down over her head. When Shindo brushed a tear from her cheek with his finger, she tilted her head questioningly and asked, "Shindo...would it make you happy if I forgot?"

“Yes, it would.”

“Everything?”

“...Yes, everything.”

Satsuki gave him a big smile. She was like an angel, her eyes clear, her smile adorable. “Then I’ll forget,” she promised.

Rustle...! The wisteria flowers jostled, dropping a cascade of petals. The petals began to encircle Satsuki in their fluttering dance.

“If you want me to forget...then I’ll forget...” Satsuki agreed.

Like a squall, the wisteria petals poured upon Satsuki, hiding her from sight. Only her hands upon Shindo’s cheeks poked through the lavender curtain.

“...Miss.” Shindo gave her hands a squeeze.

“Shindo...” came her happy voice from the curtain of flower petals. “Stay with me...forever...”

“Miss!”

Shindo had to fight back the tears forming in his eyes. If he allowed the dam to break, there would be no stopping the cascade of tears, never before shed by his eyes.

The curtain of petals gradually began to dissipate. As he felt the weight of Satsuki’s hands fall into his own, he knew she had passed out. With this, the wild dance of the wisteria petals drew to an end.

“Miss...” Shindo whispered. He sat on the ground with Satsuki in his arms, unable to move for some time.

“I...” he said in a quivering voice with his arms wrapped around the little girl. “I will stay with you...for as long as I live...”

It was quite possible he was crying.

“**PLEASE** don’t cry...” Shindo soothed, gazing at Satsuki as she cried before him. Her eyes were still just as clear as they were back then. He felt like Satsuki could engulf him in her overflowing kindness and compassion, while he...

“I’m the one who stole this moment from you... And now it’s my fault this painful memory has resurfaced... I can’t begin to apologize enough,” he said.

Satsuki’s hands trembled slightly against his cheeks. The gentle warmth of them cleansed Shindo’s heart now, just as they did in the past.

“Shin...do...”

But Satsuki’s tears did not dry up. Her hands slid from his cheeks to the back of his head. She began to entwine his soft, wavy hair in her fingers.

“Please don’t cry...” Shindo repeated. His lips brushed against an eyelid...

“Shin...do...” Satsuki’s spellbinding whisper drifted in the air.

Shindo's lips brushed her eyelids, sweeping away the tears through her wet interlocked upper and lower lashes.

"Please don't cry, Miss..." His hushed voice was so soft he was afraid she might not be able to hear him. The sound of the bed's springs with each minor movement along with the rustle of the sheets each time they turned their heads or shifted their bodies only made his voice seem louder.

"I...took someone important to you..." Satsuki wept. She didn't know that when she was young. Filled with the simple desire "I don't want to lose Shindo," her powers went out of control. She only cared about what she wanted when her heart flew into that mad frenzy. But she knew better now.

She personally killed the man Shindo loved throughout his youth like family. He was also a mentor for Shindo, teaching him a way of life. She had killed the only member of Shindo's family.

"No, there is no need for you to apologize," Shindo told her. He held Satsuki's head in both hands and began to stroke her hair with the tips of his fingers. "No one would care when or where someone like him turned up dead, anyway... He was the type of person no one would ever miss..."

"But I..."

Seized with sorrow after remembering the past Shindo made her forget, she couldn't get over how she used her powers to kill someone who played a role in his upbringing. She took the life of someone Shindo held dear. That thought filled her with overwhelming guilt.

"I killed someone you hold dear..." she cried.

Thanks to Shindo sweeping all her tears away, Satsuki was barely able to peel open her still bleary eyes. But what he said next made them pop wide open.

"You are the only person I hold dear."

Satsuki stared at Shindo with bulging eyes.

"...Only you, Miss..." he repeated.

Satsuki felt as if those words were going to melt her heart. Even if he only meant them as her servant, they seeped into her and resounded throughout her body with indescribable sweetness.

"Me, too..." Satsuki replied, curling her fingers twirled around Shindo's terribly soft hair. It almost seemed as if she could feel his kindness flow through her fingertips simply by touching it. "You're more important to me than anyone else, Shindo..."

No words could be found, neither by Satsuki nor by Shindo. As her clear eyes locked with Shindo's, their hearts melted into one. As they gazed upon one another, mutual feelings flew back and forth between them.

These feeling must never get voiced. It was taboo to harbor such

emotions even in the safety of their own hearts. All they could do was keep them locked in the depths of their hearts. And yet...

Even if the fact that their lips overlapped...was an unforgivable act, at least for now—at least for the moment—they didn't pull away...



“I simply can’t believe it...” Tsubaki said, unable to accept the truth of her husband’s statement. “Manabu would never say such a thing...”

They were going to make Satsuki pick one of several suitors to become her future spouse. It was something Tsukasa had wanted her to do for years. In fact, he first tried to bring the plan to fruition when she was sixteen, but called it off when she threw the house into an uproar by threatening to run away. Nevertheless, she couldn’t avoid facing reality forever. Satsuki needed to select a partner whom she could work alongside to further advance the Tsujikawa Corporation. Not to mention, she was burdened with the fate to give birth to the next heir the moment she was born.

“I’m afraid it’s true. Although I can understand you wouldn’t want to believe that came from your beloved nephew,” Tsukasa countered, noticing the distress etched in his wife’s visage through the smoke rising from the thin cigar hanging from his mouth.

Tsukasa was going to use Satsuki’s birthday party as a match-making event. When he asked Manabu what he thought about it, the younger man advised him, “You’ll need to relieve Mr. Shindo of his position as retainer.”

He wanted Tsukasa to remove Shindo from his position as Satsuki’s retainer. That meant he would no longer be in a position to stay glued to her side, serving at her beck and call. He would be reduced to just another attendant, offering his mistress assistance with her work and life, but nothing more.

Having served Satsuki since shortly after she was born, Shindo knew her better than anyone—even her parents. She couldn’t ask for a more trustworthy secretary when she was ready to take over the Tsujikawa name. Bearing that in mind, Tsukasa began assigning Shindo work at headquarters several years ago. In this relatively short period of time, he already managed to earn an administrative position in the Office of Information Management.

“I thought Manabu realizes just how dependent Satsuki is on Shindo, and how much she relies on him. What would compel him to say that?” Tsubaki persisted.

Ever since they were little, Manabu doted on Satsuki as if she were his little sister. Much like Shindo, he also watched over her from the time she was little. Although he wasn’t made aware of her unnatural powers, he knew what she was thinking, what she wanted, and what her goals were. It could be said he was the man who understood her best after Shindo.

“Why would Manabu...?” Tsubaki trailed off, miserably clutching her hands before her chest. She couldn’t put it from her head. Memories of that horrifying disaster from when Satsuki was four were

still vivid.

"The Miss...used her powers..." the boy holding Satsuki said as he collapsed before Tsubaki. His face was wrought with sorrow unlike anything she'd seen before.

"I'm so sorry... It was all my fault... I'm so sorry." He apologized over and over again with Satsuki in his arms. His apologies blurred into a tearless wail.

When an assassin attempted to take Shindo away, Satsuki killed him. It happened in an uncontrolled outburst of power... All to avoid losing the person she called, "Shindo."

Shindo dedicated his body and soul to protecting Satsuki so that the existence of her powers wouldn't cause her suffering or sorrow. That was supposed to be the nature of his duty. He blamed himself for failing in his duties. He believed the blood of the man Satsuki killed was on his hands, not hers.

If Satsuki was in danger of losing Shindo again, would she lose sight of herself once more? Would she fly into an uncontrollable rage? This was a completely different situation from when she was four. She would be turning eighteen. Emotionally, it was an age where she possessed both the maturity of an adult and the immaturity of a child. Not to mention...the emotion to love another.

Tsubaki couldn't quell the unease surging inside. Could Satsuki endure her fate as an heiress in her current state?

ONLY the gentle sound of breathing echoed in Satsuki's ears. The image of the man she loved projected against her closed eyelids. And then her lips met his warm touch.

Shindo's lips invitingly scooped Satsuki's tongue, floundering in embarrassment at their tender touch. He gently sucked her tongue before nipping her lower lip with the tip of his, only to trace where he nipped with his tongue. They gradually shifted their heads, adjusting the dynamics of their kisses with their lips interlocked; an occasional sigh escaped from the side of their mouths.

It was impossible to say how long the two showered kisses upon one another... Their bodies filled with passion burned at the touch of each other.

The thought that Shindo could hear her heart's thunderous beating made Satsuki want to die of embarrassment. As if trying to put that thought from her mind, Shindo showered her with one kiss after another, filling her with joy.

She felt light in a sensation reminiscent to...intoxication. Her body was so hot she swore she was going to melt. It was followed by a natural desire. The desire was perfectly natural. She wanted him to touch her more...

Similar emotions rose within Shindo's heart as well. He loved Satsuki so very, very much it hurt. In the face of that love, no constraints held power over him. All emotional restraints were rendered meaningless.

His body was also burning so hot he could scream. And much like Satsuki, the same perfectly natural desire was surging within him. He wanted to touch her...more...

The feelings and desires of the two overlapped in perfect harmony. So when Shindo stopped stroking her hair to slowly move his hand to her waist, Satsuki wasn't the least bit upset. But assaulted by emotions she never experienced before, a moan escaped her lips unlike anything Shindo, or Satsuki herself for that matter, had ever heard before.

The moment Shindo heard her make that seductive sound, his body jolted with an uncharacteristic start and he hastily pulled away from Satsuki! He unwrapped his arm from around her waist, placing his hand next to her before quickly pushing himself away.

He looked down at Satsuki with wide eyes as he apologized, "...I'm sorry... I'm terribly sorry!"

It was out of character for Shindo to act so distressed. He pulled away from Satsuki and quickly jumped off the bed. Upon catching his breath, he placed one hand under Satsuki's shoulder and the other behind her back in order to slowly ease her up.

"How do you feel...? Did that make you feel worse...?" he asked, looking her straight in the eye. Both of her hands clung to his supportive arms.

Flushed, she blinked in confusion. Her slightly open lips were left moist and slightly reddened from prolonged kissing. The expression on her face was beautiful...as if she were lost in a dream.

"No...I'm fine," she answered in a gentle, dreamy voice.

"I'm so sorry..." Shindo apologized again. He quietly brushed aside a strand of tussled hair hanging over Satsuki's face with his fingertips and began combing it along with the rest of her hair.

"I stepped out of line... I hope you can forgive me for what I did..." Shindo said only to come to the realization that he was more distressed than he thought. His hands were shaking.

What I did to the Miss was impermissible! I must never get lost in the heat of the moment. It's completely inexcusable...!

Practicing self-restraint was part of his daily life where Satsuki was concerned. Whenever his emotions escalated, he reined them in and cooled them off. That was how he hit the reset button in his heart. But he wasn't able to hit reset this time. Lost in the moment, he submitted to his surging emotions and kissed Satsuki.

He kissed the Miss! Staff must never commit any form of sexual

conduct with their employers! As it was, it was taboo to harbor special feelings for his little lady...

"...Please don't apologize..." Satsuki begged, resting her hand against Shindo's cheek. She started tracing her hand down his jawline, coming to the very lips that guided her to that wondrous dream she was in only moments ago.

"Please don't apologize...Shindo..." Satsuki repeated. Those lips generally assumed traits that made them appear cold and stern, yet against her fingers, they felt unimaginably soft...and warm. Just because Shindo kissed her, his mistress, Satsuki thought no less of him for harboring emotions beyond those of a retainer when he touched her. That was irrefutable proof that she harbored feelings for him as well.

Yet Shindo only held himself responsible for failing to keep his emotions in check. *If only I was able to curb my emotions! If only I was able to hit the reset button in my heart like always! Then the Miss wouldn't have humiliated herself in front of her lowly retainer. I never should have touched her in that frame of mind...*

"Shindo..." Satsuki opened her lips longingly, but Shindo turned his head to avoid her gaze.

"You must be tired... I'll go get you something to drink," he offered. He pulled his hands away from Satsuki and quickly stood. Spinning around, he turned his back to her. "It will only take a minute. I will be right back with a cool beverage."

"Shin...do...?"

"I think you might enjoy a carbonated beverage once every now and then. How about I bring your favorite, grape soda? Or would you prefer something else...?"

"Shindo..."

As if in an attempt to avoid confronting how Satsuki felt, Shindo kept his back turned toward her as he prattled on. "I will be certain to escort you to the greenhouse this afternoon... I believe it would be a nice change of—"

Unable to suppress her emotions any longer, Satsuki barked, "Shindo!" At the sound of his name, Shindo's voice cut off.

It did happen... The moment their lips locked...each of their hearts filled with the same emotion, overlapping with one another.

Satsuki could feel it happen. She could tell that Shindo felt the same as her. That feeling transformed into joyous rapture, engulfing her entire body. She didn't want this to be nothing more than her imagination. She didn't want it to be a mere misunderstanding. She loved Shindo more than anyone else...after all.

That feeling also swept through Shindo. He believed Satsuki might share the same feelings as him. That feeling lifted his spirits to

uncharted heights, giving him a sense of wholeness. He didn't want this to be nothing more than his imagination. He didn't want it to be a mere misunderstanding. He loved Satsuki more than anyone else. She was his entire world.

However, any open display of such affection was absolutely inexcusable... They must not love one another. They must not feel for one another. They must not touch. That was the silent command passed on the two.

"Miss..." Shindo told Satsuki with his back still facing her, "please forget this ever happened... If you're willing to forgive how I stepped out of line..." With his back to Satsuki, Shindo repeated once more, "...please forget what happened..."

Satsuki couldn't tear her eyes away from Shindo's back. Why did she have to forget? Why did she have to erase this memory when it filled her body with wondrous intoxication unlike anything she ever felt before?

"Shin...do..." Satsuki squeaked, her voice trembling.

In truth, she understood. Why did she have to forget? She knew the answer painfully well. Both Shindo and Satsuki were made excruciatingly aware of why.

"Shindo, do you want me to forget?"

Perhaps a small part—just an itty-bitty part—of her was clinging to hope. She was wishing he might reply, "I don't want you to forget."

However, the words out of Shindo's mouth were more or less those of a retainer. "It was a...mistake," he said simply. It was as if that one, short sentence bore his emotions.

They had to forget what transpired. Even if it was only for a moment, their hearts were never supposed to connect. Brief as it was, their feelings were never supposed to harmonize. Acting in defiance against the silent command wasn't an option for either.

"Very well..." Satsuki answered in a tremulous, drawn voice. "If you want me to forget...Shindo..."

Satsuki's view of Shindo's back began to blur as tears began overflowing from her eyes. Fighting back sobs, she rejected saying what was in her heart as she replied, "...I will forget..."

Tears slid down her cheeks. They rolled down endlessly one after the next. Firmly biting her bottom lip to hold back the sobs, Satsuki continued to stare at Shindo's back.

"Thank you...Miss," Shindo replied in an unusually small, weak voice.

Shindo never looked back. He fled from the room without turning back. He had no way of realizing that behind him, Satsuki shed an endless stream of tears as she swallowed her sobs.

"Please forget..." The sound of Shindo's voice echoed in her ears

on end.

“Shindo...” Satsuki’s lips moved in the shape of his name. Pressing her fingers to those lips in reverie, she could still recall his touch. As brief as it was, she thought she could melt in the joy. It helped to erase her painful encounter at school.

“Please forget...”

But she had to put this from her mind. It was not a memory she could keep.

Satsuki suddenly noticed the vase had fallen off the nightstand. The beautiful ivory roses were strewn across the floor in a pool of water. She remembered how Miharu laughed, warning her not to “abuse the bed.”

“Miharu isn’t going to be very happy with me, is she?” Satsuki said to herself. She started to climb off the bed with the intent to collect the roses.

“Please forget...” Shindo’s voice raced across Satsuki’s mind once more, stopping her in her tracks and squeezing her chest.

If she forgot, she would be freed of this suffering. She simply needed to forget all that transpired...

“I will forget, so...”

How wonderful it would be if she could actually forget. But Satsuki knew better. It was impossible. She couldn’t possibly forget.

“Shindo...” she whispered nevertheless. “...I’ll forget, so please stay with me...”

To keep from losing him, she would lie to herself. She would use her abilities to thrust everything into the abyss of oblivion. Never mind that it was impossible for all of her memories to truly vanish...

Chapter 3: Destiny Angel

“**GOOD** morning, Miss Satsuki,” one of the girls at school greeted.

“Good morning. Are you feeling better?” greeted another.

The moment Satsuki stepped out of the car, she was drowned in a chorus of words from well-wishers. While she expected to be the center of attention after missing an entire week of school, she never dreamed the students would fly into a flurry of joy at the sight of her.

“You’re quite popular with the ladies. I’m jealous,” Shindo teased genially as he took Satsuki’s hand and helped her out of the car.

“Really? It is quite wonderful,” Satsuki retorted somewhat curtly with a wry smile. Turning to face the school entrance bustling with students on their way to the main building, she skimmed her eyes across the throng of young ladies ogling her and threw a smile in their general direction.

“Thank you. I’m all better now. I’m sorry for all the concern I’ve caused,” Satsuki said to the group of girls. A flood of sighs resounded from all directions by the swooning teens.

After a week’s absence, the angel of Sakai Private High School for Girls was back. There were relived undertones in the sighs issued from the girls bedazzled by Satsuki.

After the “explosion”, Satsuki took off a week from school. Today marked her first day back since the incident. Once her personal Benz became visible from outside the school gate, students who spotted it from inside the main building were so excited, they went down to the entrance hall to greet her. Admittedly, not all came to see Satsuki; some came with the intent to catch a glimpse of Shindo.

“Miss,” Shindo warned in slightly hushed tones to Satsuki as she smiled at the crowd of girls. Satsuki looked up at him in surprise. Once he had her attention, he lightly tapped his thumb against his chest with his opposite hand.

“I believe imaginations will be running wild after your week absence. Please be extra careful today. Make absolute certainty...the door to your heart remains shut tight,” he strongly advised.

“Yes, I know,” Satsuki answered agreeably with a smile, making Shindo smile in turn. They looked just like a princess and knight out of a fairy tale. The wild thoughts running through the teenage girls who watched them would have been wearing on her mind if she left her heart open to them.

“Shindo? What are your plans for today?” Satsuki asked.

“I can’t leave you unattended after you’ve been ill for so long. I will remain here on standby in your private suite all day,” he answered, deftly reassuring her worries that he’d go work at her father’s office.

Still holding Satsuki’s right hand, he came around from her side to kneel before her. Then he pulled the back of her hand to his lips. “I will be forever at your side,” he promised.

Jolt! At the touch of his lips, Satsuki’s hand began to quiver violently enough to draw his attention. In the breadth of a moment, Satsuki gracefully slipped her hand out of his. Shindo looked up at her somewhat baffled. This was the first time Satsuki ever pulled her hand away from him rather than wait for him to let go.

“I-I see...” she replied in a voice that was clearly quavering as she held her hands to her chest, her left hand clasped over her right.

“Miss...?” Puzzled, he slowly rose to his feet.

In an attempt to gloss over what just happened, Satsuki hastily ordered, “D-Don’t just stay up in the private suite. I’ll get upset if you don’t come by the classroom. Understood? D-Don’t make me search for you!”

“But of course,” Shindo replied hesitantly. He wasn’t sure what just happened, but Satsuki was visibly distressed. “Miss?” He studied her face. The slightly flushed cheeks on her melancholic countenance made his heart race. “I should go park the car...” he said, pulling away from her.

Even after he slid into the car and she could hear it slowly drive away, Satsuki adamantly refrained from turning to look in his general direction. Yet she still held her hands over her bosom.

“Shin...do...” she whispered, clenching her hands over her chest.

The hand Shindo graced with his lips was burning hot. It was meant as a customary sign of admiration. But her chest boomed with the rhythm of her heart’s thunderous patter. It was obvious she no longer viewed Shindo the same as before. That fact was starting to dawn on Satsuki.

“Satsuki!” a zealous voice greeted her. “Good morning! It’s so good to see you! Are you all better now?!” Without an ounce of deceit, the genuinely ecstatic young lady jumped out of the car dropping her off. It was Satsuki’s classmate and fellow Student Council member, Alice Misakimori. She ran toward Satsuki with the hem of her uniform flaring so wildly, Shindo would have chastised Satsuki for such “unladylike behavior” if she did the same.

“Good morning, Alice.” Satsuki smiled at the winded girl before her.

“I never dreamed you would be out for so long! You had me worried sick. It’s great to have you back. You’re all better, aren’t

you?"

"Thank you for your concern. I'm sorry to have worried you."

"Just don't push yourself too hard, okay? Let me know if you start to feel bad or have issues with anything," Alice insisted.

"Thank you," Satsuki replied, appreciative of how Alice treated her with such open kindness.

"Um...Satsuki..." Alice's eyes were darting this way and that.

Quickly realizing what Alice was implying, Satsuki casually replied, "If you're looking for Shindo, he left to park the car. He should be here any moment, if you'd like to wait."

"Oh! Sorry! I didn't mean it like that!" Alice frantically defended herself, but the slight flush of her cheeks made it apparent she was searching for any sign of Shindo in tow.

Satsuki was well aware that Alice was among the group of girls who fawned after Shindo. Whenever she felt how the girl was true to the tiny bud of love growing within, Satsuki's heart was visited by a massive, repulsive emotion. It was the emotion known as jealousy...

"B-By the way, something terrible happened while you were out," Alice brought up in an attempt to change the subject. The muscles of her flustered face tightened as her expression grew serious. "Miss Narusawa dropped out of school..."

Satsuki kept any emotion from showing on her face as she listened to Alice. "Maybe you've already heard...? About how Narusawa Holdings' stock crashed...? I don't really get how any of that works...but she's got it pretty rough, huh?"

"...Yes, I'm sure," Satsuki replied, her voice flat.

"My dad was telling me it's easy for this sort of thing to happen to new enterprises, so we need to be careful too..." Despite laughing it off with a shrug, she was watching Satsuki like a hawk. "...I bet such concerns are beneath an old giant like your Tsujikawa Corporation, huh...?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that. It's not as if we can foresee the direction the world is headed," Satsuki answered with her poker face still on. But inside, she was genuinely glad that she followed Shindo's advice and kept the door to her heart shut tight. At the moment, Alice's heart was undoubtedly filled with suspicion not only toward her, but also toward Tsujikawa Corporation. Narusawa Holdings fell into a rapid decline. No matter how ignorant she was of the business world, even Alice knew there were people who thought nothing of sinking a company.

"Shindo certainly is taking a while. I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Alice." In an attempt to restore the once cheerful atmosphere, Satsuki was the one to change the topic this time.

At the mention of Shindo's name, Alice flew into a flurry yet

again. “I-It’s fine! I’m only waiting because I want to!” she exclaimed.

Satsuki was jealous of how Alice was true to her heart. Wouldn’t life be so much easier if she could openly display the emotions in her own heart? Not that she was allowed that freedom.

Their conversation was cut short by the sound of an engine loudly booming across campus! The surrounding girls, their chauffeurs, Satsuki, and Alice looked around to find the source of the roaring sound.

“Hey! Wait!” the security guard at the gate commanded the vehicle to stop. “Stop right there!” His shouting mingled with the peel of the engine. But rather than shutting off, the roar of the engine swiftly drew closer to the school entrance.

What zoomed into the drop-off zone was a single sportbike. Instead of pulling to a safe stop on the road, the motorcycle came crashing toward Satsuki and Alice, who were standing right in front of the entrance!

“Eiyaa!” Alice screamed and shrunk in on herself.

Eyes fixed on the vehicle, Satsuki focused her mind on the motorcycle. She was going to force the incoming bike to “be still.” But before she could use her powers, it shifted to one side and slid to a complete stop at an angle—right in front of Satsuki!

As Satsuki tried to get a better look at the rider, he suddenly grabbed her arms and pulled her toward him!



“...Satsuki...Tsujikawa...?” The man—no, the teen—straddling the motorcycle said her name. He was sporting a black motorcycle jacket with jeans. He pulled off his motorcycle helmet. The finely chiseled features of his handsome face were rather fetching. Mesmerized by his good looks, Satsuki was unable to peel her eyes away.

The young man’s eyes were icy. They were the type of piercing, cold eyes that lost all hope in the world. Whoosh... A passing breeze gently ruffled his hair. While the handsome features of his visage only emphasized his icy eyes, they were softened greatly by his wavy hair tousled in the breeze. The air about him somehow brought Shindo to mind.

The young man curled his lips in a sneer that didn’t touch his eyes. A deep voice passed through his lips as he said, “I’ve finally found you...Satsuki...”

His smile was so cold, it could freeze a person in their tracks. Satsuki couldn’t shake the sinking feeling she had seen his frigid smile before...

“Stop it! Kaido!” came a desperate shout accompanied by someone grabbing the teen’s hand latched onto Satsuki’s arm. “Get your hands off her! Do you have any idea who you’re messing with?!”

It was Alice. With eyes bulging in disbelief at the events unfolding before her, her face was contorted in fear.

The young man snorted disdainfully at Alice before poking Satsuki’s nose. She’d been staring at the rude biker who appeared out of nowhere as if he were an exotic animal.

“Satsuki Tsujikawa, the president of Tsujikawa Corporation’s only daughter. Reputed to be ‘delicate as a flower, beautiful as an angel,’ you earned the title ‘Tsujikawa Sacred Blade’ with your great beauty and superior intellect...”

The lines sliding off his tongue seemed complimentary at first, but after a moment’s pause, he snorted disdainfully once more before continuing, “But in reality, you’re just a naïve baby doll who’s completely dependent on that coddling attendant.”

“Kaido!” Alice snapped. It was obvious she knew the delinquent. Unable to endure any more of his outlandish insults, she started to stomp toward him. But Satsuki flung her arm in front of Alice to stop her from coming forward. With a loud “Crack!” she slapped the boy’s finger off her nose.

“You shouldn’t point at people. Didn’t you learn that as a child?” Satsuki asked belittlingly, staring with sharp eyes into the boy’s condescending gaze. His brows furrowed before the strength of her eyes, but quickly countered by returning the hard stare.

“My bad, Miss,” he mocked. This time he grabbed Satsuki’s chin with the hand she slapped away. “You’ve got nice eyes... I should’ve

expected as much from the *Sacred Blade*.”

His repeated insults toward Satsuki made the surrounding girls fly into an uproar. Taking advantage of the ruckus, his voice dropped to a hushed volume meant for Satsuki’s ears alone, “Do the voices of these moronic human hearts...still give you grief...?”

Eh...? The harsh gaze Satsuki held on the boy suddenly softened. *What...did he say...?*

“Do they still plague you...?” Just as Satsuki’s countenance softened, his expression changed to one of pity.

What...is this person talking about...? That question led Satsuki to an unlikely hypothesis. *Could he somehow know I have psychic powers?* But that was impossible. The only people privy to the knowledge she possessed powers were her parents and Shindo.

Satsuki left herself wide open as she peered questioningly at the young man. Seeing that vulnerability, his look of pity returned to his initial cold smile. With her chin firmly held in his grasp, he slowly drew his face toward hers.

“It’ll be a pleasure...getting to know you, Satsuki.”

Scream-like squeals rose from the surrounding girls. After all, some insolent biker was about to steal the lips of the Tsujikawa heiress, revered as the “School Angel,” right in front of the entrance to Sakai Private High School for Girls’ main building. While some girls screamed, others hushed them to keep quiet. The security guard on the grass frantically rushed to intervene, but—

The ruffian didn’t so much as touch Satsuki’s lips. The moment he began to lean in, his hand was torn from her chin. He fell off his bike and crashed onto the ground as if flung. Actually, “thrown off his bike” might be a better description.

Dashed against the ground, the teen pushed himself back up. He looked up at the towering man in a dark gray suit trying to block Satsuki from sight. Accustomed to the man who appeared out of nowhere serving as her shield, Satsuki reached out and placed her hand on his back. Struck with a sense of relief, she couldn’t help but crack a smile.

“...Shindo,” she breathed.

On his way back from parking the car, Shindo heard the commotion near the entrance and returned to Satsuki as quickly as he could. When he discovered the young man on a bike leaning to kiss Satsuki, he raced over and pinioned the delinquent from behind before yanking him off the motorcycle. Of course, slamming him onto the ground was purely...*intentional*.

The teenager rubbed his battered body as he rose to his feet. Gripping the handles in both hands, he leaned out over the body of the bike and glared balefully at Shindo.

“Heh... I guess that’d be you, huh? The ‘attendant’ spoiling the princess,” the biker spat.

In response to his challenging glare, Shindo didn’t so much as bat an eye as he replied calmly, “If you leave now, no harm will come to you. But if you’d like to get hurt, let’s take this off school grounds. It would inconvenience the Miss if we proceeded any further here.”

It was unusual for Shindo to act so hostile of his own volition, adding oil to the fire. Even in a situation like this, he would normally defer to Satsuki on how to handle the matter. If she told him to “deal with the boy,” he would deal with the boy in whatever way deemed appropriate, whether in a fight or otherwise. But he would never take the gauntlet thrown without consulting her first.

It went to show just how far he was from inner peace. This delinquent brat approached Satsuki while he was away. Although he didn’t know what transpired in his absence, he did know that the louse put his dirty mitts on her. On top of that, he was trying to steal first base! As her retainer—her bodyguard—that was unforgiveable. Of course, he was most certainly assaulted by another emotion as well...

Straightening, the youth heaved a sigh with his hands in his pockets and smiled faintly. “It’s not like anything good’ll come from getting physical here... I love getting physical with the ladies, but I hate getting physical with guys,” he said, delivering the vulgar joke in crude tones that made Satsuki’s face twist with distaste.

Standing at her side, Alice noticed Satsuki’s look of disapproval from the corner of her eye. She nervously admonished, “Stop it! You shouldn’t say things like that...”

“Shut it, Alice! I’ve had enough of you butting it!” he suddenly yelled at Alice. She fell into silent submission, her whole body trembling.

The youth threw his hands up in a derisive shrug before effortlessly mounting the bike. Catching a glance of Satsuki from behind Shindo, he waved to her with one hand and said, “See you around, Satsuki.”

Revving the engine to full throttle, there was barely time for the loud boom unique to motorcycles to sink in before he spun off with tires screeching.

Alice hesitantly approached Satsuki, who was left staring at the uproar that consumed the school grounds and main entrance. She timidly asked, “Are you okay, Satsuki?”

Not wanting to worry the clearly apprehensive classmate, Satsuki flashed her a smile out of consideration. “I’m fine. But honestly, I’d like to thank you. You spoke out on my behalf, didn’t you?”

“...O-Oh, it was nothing... Alice responded. She opened her

mouth to continue but the loud ping of the first bell disrupted her words.

"We best get to class." Satsuki said making her way toward the school doors.

"**WOULD** you like to return to the mansion?" The sound of Shindo's worried voice snapped Satsuki back to reality. "You've been lost in thought for a while now. If you aren't feeling well..."

Shindo was kneeling before her.

"Shindo..." Satsuki whispered, her voice coming out weaker than intended.

"Please...sit here..." She patted the spot next to her on the sofa.

Accepting her invitation, Shindo slightly bobbed his head before sitting. In the same manner he always used when something troubled her, he gently draped one arm over her shoulders to pull her close in hopes of offering her comfort. However...

Jolt! Satsuki's body gave a jerk and began trembling. Placing her hand on Shindo's chest, she hastily pushed him away.

"...Miss?" Shindo asked, probably the more surprised of the two. This was a first for her.

"Ah... I'm sorry... It's nothing..." It was also unlike her to look so frail as she apologized.

Satsuki was currently with Shindo in the Tsujikawa private suite on the fifth floor of the main building. Shindo informed administration she was retiring to her private suite for a while due to the mental and physical fatigue incurred from a run in with a "suspicious character" that morning. Seeing as the Tsujikawa heiress just underwent a traumatic experience at school, missing class wouldn't be held against her.

Nearly an hour passed since they first entered the room, but Satsuki still seemed troubled as she wracked her brain over something. If she left for class in her current state, Shindo would worry sick.

"It's not like I'm sick. I'm fine..." Satsuki reassured him. Grabbing the lapel of Shindo's suit with the hand that spurned him, she slowly leaned onto his chest. Once more, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

In truth, Satsuki was desperately struggling to feign composure. It was normal for Shindo to hold her against his chest. Satsuki had grown accustomed to the feeling of his arms around her.

But when he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her toward him, the beating of her heart escalated more than ever before. Her temperature instantly skyrocketed; one particular emotion appeared and disappeared inside of Satsuki with unbelievable

frequency. Embarrassment...

It was that way earlier this morning as well. Shindo always displayed his loyalty with a kiss on her right hand, but that time it set her heart racing like never before.

...What am I going to do...? Satsuki fretted. She knew the root of this behavior. Satsuki had allowed herself to view Shindo as a man.

As I am now...I can't interact with Shindo like I did before.

Simply leaning against his chest with his arms around her while he stroked her hair was enough to make Satsuki want to cry from the heat rising to her cheeks. If Shindo noticed her flushed cheeks, he'd undoubtedly worry that she had a fever. Satsuki was certain of it.

"You seem a bit hot. Do you have a fever?" True to her fears, it didn't slip past him!

His question only made her pulse beat all the faster. She couldn't believe she was unnerved by something so trivial.

"Miss!" Shindo snapped harshly when she not only refused to answer him, but also hung her head with eyes downcast. He put his hand under her chin and forced her to look up at him.

"Ah...!" Satsuki bleated in confusion. It garnered an unusually surprised stare from Shindo.

Cheeks burning red, Satsuki looked up at Shindo apprehensively despite knowing it would probably make him worry. Yet instead of expressing concern, he knitted his brows in a clear display of displeasure.

"Did that kid say something to you?" he demanded.

"Huh?"

"Did he say something to trouble you? Or did he do something?" he pressed in a stern voice. He almost sounded angry. "What did he do to make you look like that?"

"Um...Shindo?"

"It was a mistake to simply let him ride off unscathed. Who in the world was he, anyway? It seemed like Miss Misakimori knew him..." Shindo vented before cutting himself short upon noticing how Satsuki was staring at him in stunned silence. "...I'm sorry... That slipped out."

"Shindo...?"

It wasn't like Shindo to speak in the heat of the moment.

"That...look on your face...brought it out of me..." he confessed. He pulled his hand away from her chin. Satsuki didn't drop her head back down. With cheeks flaring, she stared intently at him.

In a somewhat awkward expression uncharacteristic of him, he fumbled for words as he explained, "He...brought out such a beautiful expression on you..."

Her lips were dyed pink. Her eyes looked melancholic. She gave

an air of fragility that demanded he extend a protective hand. The one bringing such beauty out of Satsuki was none other than Shindo...yet he was oblivious of that fact. Why, he was convinced it was that boy. As a result, he was fraught with jealousy...

"Shindo...listen," Satsuki began. She didn't know that the emotion he was feeling was jealousy. With the door to her heart closed, it was impossible for her to feel his emotions. But as she peered at him, she felt her entire body tingle with excitement... She could feel her soul begin to soar.

"Miss..." He slightly tightened his hand over her shoulder. They were on the verge of recreating the same sweet atmosphere as before... It was going to be like that special moment.

Knock, knock... There was a rapping at the door. "Satsuki, are you in there?" Alice asked.

"**POOR** dear! Is everything okay?" Although it sounded like the question was directed toward Satsuki, Alice's eyes were fixed on the retainer who opened the door to the private suite.

"Thank you for asking... She seems to be doing much better," Shindo answered with a smile, but it was too dazzling for Alice to behold directly. Flushing, she turned away to look at the center of the room.

Realizing that Satsuki was staring intently at her from the sofa placed smack in the center of the room, she hastily dropped her head in apology. "S-Satsuki, I am so sorry... Honest to God, I mean it!"

Satsuki tilted her head quizzically as she asked, "Why do you owe me an apology?"

"Because of all those rude things Kaido did..."

At the mention of "all those rude things," Satsuki instantly realized Alice was referring to the young man on the motorcycle.

Shindo slammed the door shut and asked unusually assertively, "Who was that boy? Do you know him?"

Those questions must have been eating at Shindo. But rather than offer an answer, Alice flashed her eyes up at Shindo before falling into pained silence. Alice held Shindo in the highest regard. Whatever it was, she was having trouble bringing herself to confess it before the man she admired.

"He...is my fiancé," she finally admitted.

"Your fiancé?" Shindo asked.

Alice bit her bottom lip hard. It was obvious just by looking at her how badly she pined after Shindo, irritating Satsuki to a degree.

"Alice, don't just stand there. Come join me," Satsuki offered. Rather than submit to that irritation, she gave Alice a smile. Making room for her opposite of where Shindo sat earlier, she motioned for

her classmate to come sit at her side.

Alice frantically waved her hands across her bosom while swiveling her head from side to side. "I-I can't! I only came on behalf of the class to check on you... Everyone wanted to come, but we couldn't have a huge crowd intrude when you're up here trying to get some rest... That's why the teacher designated me to come as the class representative. I really should be going now..."

"Really? I wish you'd stay. Now that I'm starting to feel better, I'm getting a bit bored. Couldn't you stay and offer me company for a little while? Please? You don't mind, do you, Shindo?" Satsuki inquired with a smile, intentionally shifting the conversation to Shindo at the end.

Shindo threw such a radiant smile at Alice, it made her want to burst into tears. "Please stay for a spell, Miss Misakimori. If you would be so kind, could you please share some of your precious time with Miss Satsuki?"

"Uh, well, if I'm not a bother..."

"I shall go prepare some beverages. But first, if I may," Shindo said and naturally scooped Alice's hand as he began leading her to Satsuki's side. This was the first time someone escorted her in a way that felt natural and pleasant. Compounded by the fact it was done by the man she admired, the swirl of happiness and embarrassment made her want to cry.

Alice wasn't the only one who wanted to cry. Satsuki's heart was also ready to burst into tears. It was sheer agony watching Shindo lead another lady by the hand. The sadness and pain were overwhelming, but Satsuki balled her hands into fists over her knees as she endured the torment.

"Is something the matter?" Shindo asked. Upon helping Alice ease onto the sofa next to Satsuki, he noticed she wasn't quite herself.

Shindo knelt on one knee before her and lightly placed his hands on her balled fists. Under a mask that hid her pain, Satsuki looked at Shindo. Finding eyes that only reflected her, Satsuki's heart was finally able to calm down once more.

"Um...are you sure you don't feel ill...?" Alice asked. Noticing Satsuki wasn't her usual self, Alice started to rise from the sofa. But having regained her composure, Satsuki tapped the girl's arm and gave her a reassuring smile.

"That's not it. I'm fine. I'm just a bit thirsty... Shindo, if you would be so kind," she ordered.

"Certainly. Would you like something cold?"

"Yes, please."

Upon seeing Satsuki smile, Shindo withdrew to the back of the room. Facilities were installed in the suite for preparing drinks and

finger foods.

“Truth be told, Alice, this has been on my mind all morning,” Satsuki said with the events of that morning replaying in her mind as she leaned slightly toward her classmate, “but didn’t you call that boy from earlier ‘Kaido’? By any chance, is he from the Kaidos...?”

“Yes, I believe you’re probably thinking of the right family...” Alice affirmed and further elaborated on Satsuki’s implied question. “He is the president of Kaido Financial Group’s son. His name is Takemi Kaido... He has three older brothers, making him the fourth son...”

“But I heard the fourth son has been studying in America for years,” Satsuki interrupted.

“He suddenly came back. Although he’s our age, he skipped several grades while in America. Supposedly he’s already earned his B.A. I heard he was going to stay abroad for a bit longer, so his sudden return was...surprising...for me as well.”

Seeing that Alice truly was surprised, Satsuki smiled wryly. “Aren’t you his fiancée? You should welcome him back with open arms!”

But hearing this only made Alice look more troubled as she explained, “Including today, I’ve still only ever met Kaido three times.”

“Only three times?”

“During my third year of junior high, our parents suddenly arranged the engagement. We met twice during that process. Then he went to study abroad, and I never saw him after that. I have no idea when he got back, or what brought him here today...” Alice finished.

Takemi Kaido’s hushed questioned swirled in Satsuki’s mind: “*Do they still plague you...?*”

It was as if he knew... Does he know I have powers? But that’s impossible...

In the back of the room, Shindo overheard the whole story.

“**ARE** you sure you’re all right?” Shindo asked yet again, earning an exasperated chuckle from Satsuki.

“I’m fine. Seeing as I’m already here, I’d like to begin attending classes starting with third period,” Satsuki told him.

Alice came to check on her at the end of first period. She wasn’t able to return to class until well into second period after undertaking the noble task of serving as Satsuki’s conversational partner. Shindo accompanied her back to the classroom and explained the situation to the teacher lecturing during that period, so the tardy wasn’t held against her.

When Alice left the private room to return to class accompanied

by Shindo, she looked overjoyed. Satsuki found herself unable to look her classmate directly in the eye.

It was the middle of second period now. Satsuki insisted on attending classes from the next period on.

"I believe it would best if you returned to the mansion. You should call it a day... Especially considering what happened this morning," Shindo insisted. Rather than push herself, he wanted Satsuki to take it easy and rest. He was incessantly rejecting the arguments she posed to attend class.

"It's not as though he injured me. Wouldn't I only cause everyone unnecessary concern if I went home early?" Satsuki shot back. From her seat on the sofa, she looked up at Shindo standing at her side with a disapproving scowl. Lightly pressing her fingertips together before her lips as if praying, she gave him the sad puppy-eye look.

"Please! Shindo!"

Shindo couldn't possibly turn Satsuki down when she looked so cute begging for something. That was genuinely how he felt.

"Very well," he conceded, caving to that feeling. "But please be certain not to overexert yourself. We're expecting company this evening."

"Company? Coming to see me?" Satsuki asked, her eyes drawn wide. This was the first she heard of company tonight.

"It's Master Manabu," he added.

"Manabu?"

"Yes. I heard he has business with Master Tsujikawa, but apparently he requested your presence as well."

"...I wonder what it's about..." She recalled the parting promise he made when he came to wish her well the other day. He said that he would return soon to discuss something important.

Lately Manabu was coming to see her father an awful lot. She originally thought they were planning a big spectacle for her birthday, but Manabu skirted around Miharu's probing, claiming, "It's just small talk." Despite her promise to "weasel it out of him," Miharu came up empty-handed.

"I think it's related to the birthday party. If Manabu has his hands in it, I'm sure it will be amazing," Satsuki wrongly assumed.

"Are you excited?"

"I suppose I am."

Satsuki was curious what Manabu was planning for her. As her one and only cousin, she grew up loving him like a brother. And now he was planning something for her. The thought was so exciting, she couldn't wait to see what it was. Filled with that excitement, she grabbed the hem of Shindo's suit jacket and gave it a good tug.

"How about you?" she asked.

She made such a cute face when she asked him, it left Shindo momentarily dumbstruck. But he quickly recovered, answering with a smile, "I'm also excited. All the more so if it proves beneficial to you."

All of the nagging irritation from earlier seemed to disappear with his smile. "Hey, Shindo. I'd like to ask you something..." Satsuki began now that her emotions settled down. "Does anyone beside you and my parents...know about my powers?" she asked in a grave tone.

The blow dealt by the surprise Shindo took was so great, his eyes popped wide open. "No one else should know. It's outright impossible for anyone aside from your mother, father, or I to know of your powers. Not even Master Manabu is privy to this knowledge," Shindo asserted more forcefully than intended.

Realizing how he sounded, he clamped his mouth shut. However, this was a precious secret he fervently protected alongside Satsuki's parents. Shindo in particular served as a restraint on her powers. He was always watching at her side to ensure she could enjoy a normal life that wasn't overrun by them. Part of his duty included keeping tabs on Satsuki to prevent her from casually using them in everyday life or opening the door to her heart indiscriminately. He was also constantly vigilant about making sure no one ever discovered the truth about her...

"Why do you ask?" Any fear of discovery was unfounded. With that in mind, Satsuki's question from out of the blue left Shindo somewhat baffled.

After a moment's hesitation, Satsuki struggled to force the words out. "That boy...knew."

"Knew what?"

"...Takemi Kaido," —at the sound of his name, Shindo's face tensed— "he knew that I have...powers..."

"**WELCOME** home, Miss," greeted the butler, Mizuno, several of the staff, and the rest of Satsuki's attendants on standby at the mansion. She was met with their greeting upon setting foot in the entrance hall when she returned home.

"We were worried when we received word you were coming home early after all. How do you feel?" Mizuno checked with her.

Satsuki wanted to attend class, but Shindo adamantly insisted they return to the mansion.

"I guess my face must look tired. My strict retainer here chastised me, claiming, 'If you intend to go around with a face like that all day, we're going home,'" Satsuki revealed in a tattle-tale voice and shot the retainer standing beside her a sidelong glance.

"Honestly, he can be just awful!" she continued teasingly in a sullen voice reserved just for Shindo. She never even spoke this way

with her own parents.

"You're still going on about that? You know, this sounds like I was bullying you," he shot back.

"You don't say! Isn't that precisely what you're doing?"

"Miss!" Likewise, the gentle tone Shindo used to soothe the "bullied child" was reserved strictly for Satsuki. "Please stop this nonsense. All of the other attendants are going to gang up on me."

"Then if you're ever mean to me again, I'll go tell everyone 'Shindo's being a bully,' okay?" Satsuki teased, merrily turning to the other attendants.

In his late thirties, the oldest of the attendants replied with a smile, "Feel free to at any time," inviting the bemused laughter of those around.

Surrounded by such a peaceful atmosphere, Satsuki and Shindo looked at one another and smiled. Satsuki gave her best smile filled with happiness, her cheeks slightly flushed. Seeing her smile so radiantly, a joyful smile overtook Shindo's face. An extraordinary aura radiated from the two.

Probably the only one who recognized the warning signs was Mizuno, who knew both Shindo and Satsuki extremely well. His normally placid expression briefly clouded as he studied them.

"Miss, how would you like to handle lunch? Would you like to eat early today?" the elderly head housekeeper standing beside Mizuno asked the young lady. This was Shizuko, Mizuno's wife.

Satsuki gave a little giggle before replying, "I'll eat at the usual time. I have such a small appetite, I wouldn't mind skipping lunch outright."

"That's unacceptable."

She merely went to school only to turn right around and come back home, so she didn't work up much of an appetite. Although the idea of sitting down for lunch seemed tiresome, her "strict retainer" quickly stepped in.

"...Make it light then," she conceded, flashing Shindo a nasty look.

Shizuko lightly laughed and replied, "Certainly."

Accustomed to Satsuki's dirty looks, Shindo was unfazed by her dark glare. It didn't bother him in the least. In fact, he was outright delighted the little lady followed his instructions. With a bright grin, he said, "Would you like to rest in your room until lunch? If there is anything you would like to do, please let me know..."

"Well, I haven't played the violin in a while... It's been long enough, would you mind tuning it for me, Shindo?"

"Of course not. I will go tune it in the music room. Would you like me to take it to your room when I'm done?" he asked, shifting his

eyes to the attendants. Two from among the group stepped forward. Since he would head straight to the music room, they would be in charge of escorting Satsuki to her room.

"Oh, I know!" Satsuki burst out after taking a few steps with one attendant on either side and spun around to face Shindo. "I'll play whatever you like today, Shindo. What will it be? Beethoven? Mendelssohn? Or Brahms like usual?"

Shindo gently replied, "In that case, I'd like to hear Brahms."

"You love his music, don't you? I love it too..." Although she was referring to the music, saying the word "love" felt oddly embarrassing. Stumbling over the word only made her all the more embarrassed. In a fluster, Satsuki turned away and resumed walking to her room.

The staff watched Satsuki until she reached the top of the spacious staircase in the center hall before returning to their own posts. Shindo was about to hurry off to the music room to tune Satsuki's violin, but Mizuno grabbed his arm.

"...Akira," Mizuno beckoned, making Shindo's eyebrows twitch. When Mizuno called Shindo by his first name, it generally meant he had something unpleasant to say.

Back when Shindo first came to Tsujikawa mansion as a twelve-year-old lad, Mizuno was the person assigned to serve as his instructor. From proper grammar to etiquette, Mizuno taught the ignorant boy everything from the basics up. When Mizuno first laid eyes upon the shifty-eyed boy of questionable background, he had his doubts, but Shindo proved more dexterous and attentive to detail than he initially gave the boy credit for. He was willing to take initiative and above all else, he was bright.

Shindo absorbed things like a sponge, obtaining a normal degree of common knowledge. It didn't take long for Mizuno to feel "it's okay to let him out of my sight."

As far as Mizuno was concerned, Shindo was like a son to him. Although he generally referred to him as "Shindo," he would switch to "Akira" only when lecturing the lad about his position.

"Akira, you haven't forgotten, have you...?" Mizuno's tone came out harsh, reprimanding Shindo. "You are the Miss's retainer... You realize what that means, don't you?"

Shindo's heart was thrown into turmoil, but he kept it from showing.

"I've warned you several times since you were assigned as the Miss's retainer... Do you remember that warning?"

"I do," Shindo quietly answered.

He was still just a boy when he was first assigned the position of retainer. But by the time Satsuki bloomed into a young lady, that boy

would be a fine young man. Foreseeing the future, he told young Shindo time and again, "The Miss is your boss. You must never, under any circumstance, harbor unnecessary feelings for her."

"I understand..." Did Mizuno notice that Shindo's voice quivered ever so slightly? "She...is my boss..."

He must never harbor special feelings for her. She would always be out of his reach, just like an angel in the heavens...

"**WERE** you thinking about something?" Satsuki giggled as she turned to Shindo after lowering her violin bow.

"What do you mean?"

"The G string sounds a bit different from usual. It might not be noticeable to anyone listening, but you pick up on it when you're the one playing," Satsuki explained.

True to her deduction, Shindo was indeed lost in thought when tuning her violin.

Planning to kill time until lunch by playing the violin, he retrieved her violin from the instrument room and went to tune it in the spacious music room with its grand piano and wood floor. Just as he finished tuning the violin, Satsuki waltzed in. Satsuki said that she would play Brahms just for him. Readying her bow, she began to play right then and there.

It was Brahms's "Violin Concerto". But Satsuki cut her solo of the 1st Movement short. Apparently she found the ever so slightly off-tune G string too distracting.

"I'm sorry. I'll tune it right away..." Shindo tried to take the violin, but she skirted around his outstretched hands.

"What were you thinking about?" she asked. The violin's body was cradled in her right arm, the bow held in her right hand. With her left hand, Satsuki reached out and touched Shindo's hand. His right hand was left floundering when Satsuki refused to let him take the violin, but now his fingers twined with hers.

"Was it about Takemi Kaido?" she prompted.

Shindo was naturally concerned about Kaido, but at the moment, it was none other than Satsuki who confused his heart. Mizuno's warning only made him more aware of her. The more he tried not to think about Satsuki, the more thoughts of her filled his mind.

Shindo could always hit the reset button in his heart to contend with those emotions in the past. He was supposed to put emotions derailing from his position as a retainer back on track by resetting his heart with an ironclad will...

But it was beginning to dawn on Shindo that he was losing the ability to hit reset. Thinking back, it began the day he followed his heart and kissed Satsuki. Ever since that day, he was losing the ability

to restrain his heart. He felt the danger in his wayward emotions all too keenly.

"It's...my fault, isn't it?" Satsuki asked, folding her fingers threaded between Shindo's and squeezing his hand. "I shouldn't have concerned you with that..."

She was referring to how Takemi Kaido apparently knew she had powers. Someone aside from Shindo and Satsuki's parents knew about her powers. Although it was hard to believe, that was reality.

With that in mind, Satsuki was filled with regret as she wondered, *Why didn't I read Kaido's mind back then?* Kaido's words and very presence were so unnerving, she couldn't.

Seeing Satsuki lower her gaze in unease, a pang of pain spread in Shindo's chest.

"Miss," he started, squeezing her hand, "please allow me to conduct a background check on Takemi Kaido."

"A background check?"

"I'm sure to learn something if I dig deep enough. We can't simply ignore him if he does know about your powers, Miss."

The genuine concern he expressed for her brought a rosy blush to Satsuki's cheeks. She knew it was expected of him to worry. Yet Satsuki still couldn't stop her heart from pounding wildly to the beat of feelings that extended well beyond what was "only natural."

"Miss?" Shindo called, finding it strange that Satsuki didn't respond.

Snapping back to reality, Satsuki sputtered in a fluster on the verge of hysterics, "H-He said he'd be seeing me around... He might appear before me again sometime. And if he does..." The words tumbled out of her mouth on top of each other until she felt Shindo's judging eyes on her. Under his intense gaze, she found it increasingly difficult to find the words she was looking for. "...the next time...I see him...I think it might be wise...to 'check him out,' so to speak..." she finished awkwardly.

Satsuki met Shindo's gaze, looking intently back into his eyes. Unable to find any other words, she fell silent, leaving the two gazing at one another with fingers intertwined and bodies a hair apart.

Shindo stroked Satsuki's hair with his free left hand. He threaded her hair through his fingers until reaching the back of her head. If he pulled her toward him, she would fit into his arms perfectly. He could feel her body...and her pulse. But...

"I believe lunch should be ready by now. Let's go to the dining room," he said instead. Resisting his inner desire, he didn't pull her into the embrace. Upon taking the violin from Satsuki's arm and the bow from her hand, he turned his back to her.

"Would you like to play this afternoon? If you would, I will

retune it,” Shindo offered as he placed the violin and bow on top of the piano. When he turned back around, what he beheld was so shocking, he was afraid his whole body jumped. Satsuki was looking at him with such a sorrowful expression, he feared she might break out into tears at any second.

“I think I will. Please tune it, if you would... I still haven’t fulfilled your request, after all. And isn’t Manabu coming tonight? It’d be nice to play for him as well...” Satsuki struggled to say while feigning calm, her melancholic face turned away from Shindo.

“Understood,” Shindo replied, also in an artificially calm voice. He was fighting to restrain his heart, which yearned for the girl before him with terrifying passion.

“Do you suppose Manabu will come alone? I sure hope Miharu comes with him.” Finding it difficult to resume her usual mask, Satsuki spun away from Shindo. It tore at her to have him see her on the verge of tears.

The moment Satsuki thought he was going to accept her feelings, Shindo thrust her back into reality. It felt as if he spurned her personally. Her heart was filled with such sadness, it could break.

“Would you like me to call and ask?” Shindo offered.

“No, I’d prefer if it was a surprise,” she answered.

Unfortunately, this was the unavoidable reality. They could not break the taboo... Their fingers must never intertwine. Their gazes must never interlock. Their hearts must never...connect at a deeper level than that of mistress and servant.

“**GOOD** evening. Thank you for coming,” Satsuki personally greeted the guests at the front door. She only did that for special guests.

“I’m so glad to see Miharu is with you,” Satsuki said as Miharu appeared from behind Manabu, who entered the mansion one step ahead of her. The sight of her brought a genuinely happy smile to Satsuki’s face.

Claiming he had business with Tsukasa that night, Manabu arrived at around 8:00 with Miharu in tow. Eagerly awaiting their arrival, Satsuki stood before the line of staff waiting to welcome them. When they arrived, she stepped forward to greet them with a great big smile. But only Manabu returned her smile in kind.

“Good evening. What a treat to have you greet us at the door.”

“Oh, you’re too kind. By any chance, did my father make you two give up plans for a date to come here instead?” Satsuki tactfully guessed.

“What makes you ask?”

“Your princess appears to be in a mood most foul,” Satsuki explained.

It must have occurred to Miharu that she was treating the lady who welcomed her with a disgruntled smile. Although somewhat forced, she returned the smile and apologized, "I'm sorry... It's nothing like that."

Her answer came out somewhat awkward. Manabu tried to wrap his arm over Miharu's shoulders to urge her on. Miharu angrily dodged around him and marched on ahead. It would appear Manabu's princess really was in a foul mood. Manabu smiled wryly before following his fiancée.

"I wonder if they got into a fight... That is pretty rare for those two," Satsuki observed, watching them walk away. When she looked up at Shindo hovering at her side, a mischievous grin crept across his lips.

"If that is how she's acting over a little 'disagreement' now, Miss Miharu is going to turn Master Manabu into a whipped dog after they tie the knot."

"You're right! Still, I almost never see those two angry with each other," Satsuki giggled and started off. "Let's go, Shindo."

"Yes, Miss," Shindo replied, following after her.

Little did either know the announcement to set their destinies awaited them...

THE living room fell silent. But at most, the silence only lasted half a minute or so. Manabu and Miharu sat side by side on one sofa. On the sofa across from them sat Tsukasa next to Tsubaki. Sandwiched between such impressive couples sat Satsuki on an armchair. Standing on hand behind her was Shindo.

Satsuki's eyes fell on the handful of documents spread across the living room table before her. "In other words..." she broke the silence and picked up the documents, "...you're telling me to pick my future husband from these four gentlemen?"

The documents were background checks of the four young men. All four came from good families and were considered to have promising futures. If Satsuki chose any of them, there was no doubt that together they would be able to bring Tsujikawa Corporation to new heights.

"There are actually five..." Tsukasa corrected.

His initial fear that she would scream, "Not in your life!" seemed unwarranted. The furrow in Satsuki's brow was concerning, but he felt mostly relief as he turned to face Manabu. "Manabu is recommending the fifth...but the documents aren't ready yet."

"I should have them in order soon. The person in question isn't in a position to present himself here yet, so please give me some time," Manabu explained.

Satsuki wondered if that “suitor” was abroad. When Manabu finished delivering his explanation, he stole a quick glance at Miharu, who was fuming at his side the whole time.

Miharu was in a foul mood, which was hardly surprising. She knew how Satsuki and Shindo felt for one another. She was the one person who hoped everything worked out for them.

When Manabu first confided, “Satsuki must pick her future husband on her birthday,” she was thunderstruck. Learning that Manabu was an accomplice in this scheme threw her into the abyss of despair. Yet that was not the end of what troubled Miharu. There was one other thing she found simply outrageous.

“Isn’t this...” Satsuki gasped. As she shuffled through the documents, one stilled her hand. She stared so intensely at one of the background checks, she could burn a hole in it. Noticing Satsuki’s peculiar reaction, Shindo snuck a peek at the document from his position behind her. Much like Satsuki, his eyes also rounded in surprise.

“Takemi...Kaido?” That biker—Takemi Kaido—was among Satsuki’s potential suitors. But he was already betrothed to Alice. “Why is he a candidate?”

For Satsuki to ask that, Tsukasa assumed she must already know the boy. Mistaking her inquisition for interest, he merrily replied, “He was studying in America until just a few days ago. He’s the president of Kaido Financial Group’s fourth son. Although he’s your age, he’s already earned a college degree. I’ve heard that he’s far brighter than all three of his older brothers. Despite being the youngest, he could potentially wind up next in line to take over the Kaido Financial Group.”

“His background is quite similar to your father’s. That’s what drew his attention to the boy,” Tsubaki interjected. Tsukasa nodded enthusiastically in agreement.

“The other three—four if you include Manabu’s recommendation—have at least a good decade on you. I thought it might give you a better perspective if I included someone your own age,” Tsukasa added.

But Satsuki killed Tsukasa’s good mood with her harsh quip, “I’ve heard he is betrothed to one of my friends at school. So why is he even considered an option...?”

“Bluntly put, he stood out as the single most promising young man during the elimination process. The Kaidos are aware of the situation and give their full support. If you choose him, they will call off his current engagement,” Tsukasa clarified, unbothered by what that meant.

Satsuki was struck speechless. In order to choose the finest

caliber of candidates possible, her father went so far as to include a promised man. Alice claimed she didn't know why Takemi Kaido suddenly returned from America, but if there was a chance he could marry the future president of Tsujikawa Corporation, his parents would do whatever it took to make him return to Japan.

"Oh, and one more thing," Tsukasa began somewhat awkwardly. His eyes darted toward Manabu.

Feeling Tsukasa's eyes on him, Manabu focused his attention on the older man and gave a sharp nod. Then he turned to Shindo, who was looking down at Satsuki in a daze from his position behind her.

"Mr. Shindo, I'd like you to hear this as well," Manabu began somewhat gravely, causing Shindo to look up.

In truth, the news that Satsuki must choose one of these candidates to be her future spouse filled Shindo with inner turmoil. Nevertheless, he maintained a mask of calm composure, as did Satsuki...

Once he had their full attention, Tsukasa delivered a fateful announcement to Satsuki and Shindo. "After Satsuki picks her fiancé, I will have you step down from your position as retainer, Shindo."

"I won't stand for this!" The shout was not issued from Satsuki with ears burning from the declaration, let alone from Shindo.

"It isn't right! It's outright preposterous!" It came from Miharu, who had been scowling at Manabu's side the whole evening.

"You can't make Mr. Shindo step down! That's crazy! It's ludicrous!" Springing from the sofa, Miharu gave the older man on the sofa across from her a piece of her mind. Then she glanced over at Satsuki.

Satsuki's eyes were bulging. Although her mouth was slightly ajar, no sound came out. But it didn't slip past Miharu how her lips slightly trembled. Without realizing it, Satsuki began to clench the documents so tightly that large wrinkles were forming in the papers. Although she was able to somehow feign calm when she heard about the fiancé situation, this proved too much for her. Shindo was in a similar situation. With eyes wide open, he looked as though he were aghast.

It was the most improbable of announcements. To think Shindo would be released from his position as retainer! Who could have predicted such a thing? Both were convinced it was impossible for him to lose his position.

"Hasn't Mr. Shindo served at Satsuki's side since she was an infant? He knows what she's thinking and doing better than anyone. So why are you pulling her best confidant away from her?!" Miharu desperately pleaded their case to Tsukasa.

When Manabu told Miharu, "To be honest, we have to distance

Mr. Shindo from Satsuki” at the same time he confided about the suitors, the icy chill that seized her heart nearly froze it solid. There was no way they could do that. Those two must not be torn apart! Her heart writhed wildly, torn in agony for the young lady she viewed like a sister.

“What’s wrong with having a retainer? I thought Mr. Shindo also served as Satsuki’s bodyguard. Are you going to distance her from the very man protecting her?!” Miharu continued.

“Miharu,” Tsukasa gently chided his nephew’s fiancée pleading so fervently on his daughter’s behalf. Under normal circumstances, he would view this behavior as open defiance against the president of Tsujikawa Corporation. She would have no right to complain if he reprimanded her harshly like at the office. Instead, he looked upon her with kind, gentle eyes. It filled him with joy to know she cared so deeply for his beloved daughter. “Let me put it this way... How would you feel if a young woman was serving at Manabu’s side 24/7 when he’s betrothed to you?”

“Pardon?”

“Imagine if she was a secretary managing all aspects of his public and personal life. Could you find it in you to allow a woman to singlehandedly assist Manabu in every aspect of his life?”

Miharu was unable to come up with an immediate response. There was no way she could possibly tolerate that. Even if she knew nothing was going on between the two, she would probably cast suspicion on Manabu and grow jealous of the woman.

“It’s the same thing,” Tsukasa concluded as he shifted his attention from Miharu to Satsuki. With an uncharacteristically pallid face, she seemed to be holding something back.

“I can’t have a man manage all of my daughter’s affairs once she is betrothed, even if he is her greatest ally. If Mr. Shindo retains his current position, no matter which man Satsuki marries, he will become a thorn in their matrimonial bond. And friction with the very partner meant to help her someday shape the Tsujikawa Corporation would destroy the business,” Tsukasa stressed.

Everyone knew he was right. Simply allowing a strapping young man to serve a beautiful young lady made the two the object of perverse rumors these past few years. Shindo served at Satsuki’s side nearly 24/7 as her retainer. Satsuki’s mind frequently read from those around them that they were viewed in an unsavory light. *Just how thoroughly does he take care of her?* she would hear people think in their hearts.

If it were anyone other than Satsuki and Shindo, even Miharu might have looked at them with curiosity and wondered, “Is something going on between them?” In all reality, countless others

perceived Shindo and Satsuki in that light. If she decided on a fiancé, she couldn't afford to continue interacting with Shindo on this level. If they weren't careful, someone could intentionally use it as fodder for a scandal to soil the Tsujikawa name.

Nevertheless, it didn't sit well with Miharu. Miharu befriended Satsuki when the girl was fourteen. She doted on her as if she were Miharu's little sister ever since. She couldn't stand the fact that her darling Satsuki would have to defy her own heart and promise herself to a man she didn't love. Such outrage was only compounded by the fact that she was being torn apart from the man who stole her heart!

"Satsuki, come here!" Miharu snapped. She dodged around the sofa to stand next to Satsuki before suddenly yanking her up by the arm.

"Huh? Miharu?!" Satsuki gasped in surprise over suddenly getting yanked out of her chair. She had no idea what Miharu was thinking.

"What are you doing?" Manabu demanded as he sprang up in reaction to his fiancée's crazy antics. Feeling Manabu was on Tsukasa's side, Miharu shot him a look that could kill.

"I'm going to abandon Satsuki at a convenience store somewhere!" Miharu shouted.

"You're what—?!" Manabu cried wildly in response to Miharu's random declaration, his eyes twitching furiously.

Manabu wasn't the only one surprised. The person in question, as well as Shindo, drew their eyes wide as if to say, "Where did that come from?"

Ignoring the reactions of those around her, Miharu spat at Tsukasa, "I have no doubt Satsuki won't be able to make it back home. She won't even be able to fall to the last resort—calling a cab and telling the driver where she lives. Do you know why? Because Mr. Shindo is always at her side. She can't do the most basic things because she's never needed to learn how. Mr. Shindo was so observant, he did it all for her! So now Satsuki is helpless without him! Take him away, and this girl will wind up dead!"

She wasn't wrong. It was taken as a matter of fact Shindo was always with her. He would serve forever at her side, calling out to Satsuki with her hand in his. He cherished her throughout the years more than anyone. As a result, Satsuki would very likely get lost if Miharu actually dumped her at a convenience store. She didn't know her way around the streets, keep cash on her, and she had almost no experience riding alone in this strange vehicle called a "cab."

"That's enough, Miharu!" Manabu shouted in an attempt to rein Miharu in after she threw out such an outlandish threat, but she only shot him a baleful glare in return.

“I can’t believe you, Manabu! Why in the world are you taking part in this?! I thought you knew! Satsuki and Mr. Shindo—”

“Miharu!” Manabu shouted so loudly that Miharu snapped her mouth shut with a jolt. She nearly let the cat out of the bag. Realizing what Miharu was about to say, he raised his voice at her.

They were childhood friends. Yet Miharu could count the number of times he had gotten angry at her on one hand. Working under Manabu as his secretary, she was accustomed to his stern ways in the office. But when he lost his temper outside of work, it always left her speechless.

“Miss Miharu...this way,” Shindo soothed, taking the hand of the woman affected by Manabu’s yell and led her around the sofa. He quietly helped her ease into her spot next to Manabu. “...Thank you...Miss Miharu...” he whispered softly in her ear.

“At any rate...” Tsukasa restarted the main conversation. This wasn’t easy for him, either. However, it needed to be done for Satsuki, which was ultimately for the entire Tsujikawa line. “You will meet the four suitors at your birthday party. After which, you will have one month to decide. Once you make your decision after a month of deliberation, Mr. Shindo will no longer serve as a retainer but as just another attendant. Furthermore, I would like Mr. Shindo to focus more on office work henceforth. Someday I hope to make you Satsuki’s first secretary,” Tsukasa instructed, but his words failed to reach either Satsuki or Shindo.

Like a death sentence, only one fact rung in their ears. Satsuki and Shindo would be torn from one another no matter what they personally wished for...

“**ARE** you angry?” Manabu asked, but Miharu didn’t deign to reply.

He knew the answer without having to ask. To drive the point home, she continued to give him the silent treatment on their drive home from the Tsujikawa mansion.

“I guess it’s only natural for you to be...mad,” Manabu conceded with a dry chuckle.

Miharu gave her fiancé clutching the steering wheel a death glare from the passenger seat. But she quickly looked away, her gaze falling upon balled fists over her lap rather than the night lights gliding by the car outside.

“...I feel sorry for Satsuki.” These were the first words out of Miharu’s mouth. It sounded as if she were on the verge of crying. Her mind replayed the events that happened only minutes ago at the Tsujikawa mansion.

A month after her birthday, Satsuki had to decide who she would

marry and Shindo would be released from his position as retainer. She quietly endured listening to both announcements. Then Miharu pressed Tsukasa to change his mind and Manabu scolded her for it. After Shindo escorted Miharu back to her seat, Satsuki, who had been standing at the time, finally collapsed into her chair under all of the strain!

“Satsuki?!” Tsubaki leapt from the sofa in uncharacteristic haste.

Manabu, Miharu, and Tsukasa all rose from their seats. However, Shindo reached Satsuki before any other. He scooped the swooning girl protectively in his arms and begged Tsukasa, “Please excuse us! Talk of engagement and marriage came so unexpectedly, I believe the Miss is overwhelmed. Please resume the discussion another day... Please, Master Tsukasa!”

The engagement wasn’t the part that made Satsuki faint. She was unable to bear the fact that she was going to be separated from Shindo. Miharu and Tsubaki realized that. Deep in his heart, Shindo undoubtedly knew the truth as well. He also wanted to collapse from the shock, but put on a placid mask and acted as if Satsuki’s woes were due to the engagement.

“Very well. I’ve said all I meant to say, so this discussion is officially over,” Tsukasa decreed.

Hardly waiting for Tsukasa to finish uttering the last word, Shindo lifted Satsuki up with both arms. As if to apologize for leaving before the guests, he bobbed his head to Manabu and Miharu.

“Please excuse us,” he said in a somewhat preoccupied voice before carrying Satsuki out of the living room.

“**SHE** was raised to keep such a firm grasp on her position in that mammoth of a company, it’s outright sad...” Manabu whispered melancholically. He was looking straight ahead, the car stopped at a red light. “That’s why...I’m sure she’ll understand...”

Did Miharu notice the pain etched in his profile, illuminated by the city lights and cars in the other lane?

“This is her...fate...” he whispered.

“**WOULD** you like to rest in bed?” Shindo asked.

Satsuki softly shook her head and replied, “I’d prefer...the sofa,” in such a weak voice it nearly faded to nothing.

“As you wish,” Shindo answered and shut the door to her room behind him while still holding her.

When he tried to put her down on the sofa in the center of her room, Satsuki clung onto Shindo with both hands. It was clear she wanted to stay like this, held tenderly in his arms. Although it was apparent to Shindo, he nonetheless put Satsuki down on the soft, silk

blanket spread across the sofa before dropping onto one knee.

"Aren't you exhausted? If you wait a minute, I will bring you something cool to drink," he offered with his usual gentle smile. He used the same voice overflowing with love for Satsuki as always.

"Shindo..."

But after what they just heard, the way Shindo was acting the same pricked at Satsuki's heart.

"Shindo...are you okay with this?"

"Okay with what?"

Satsuki gave him a flat stare, not saying a word. She didn't have to spell it out for him. He didn't have to ask for clarification. He knew what Satsuki was asking. He knew without turning the question back at her. Was he okay with being separated?

"...I was told the same thing back on my sixteenth birthday," Satsuki said, recalling the events of two years prior as she gazed into Shindo's eyes.

This wasn't the first time Tsukasa brought up talk of betrothal. He presented the idea once when she was approaching her sixteenth birthday. But Satsuki threw the mansion in an uproar by disappearing from the property without a trace. As a result, Tsukasa decided to abandon the idea that almost made him lose his daughter once before.

"I asked you what you thought back then too," Satsuki went on.

Two years ago, only the betrothal aspect was brought up. There was absolutely no mention of revoking Shindo's title as retainer. Yet at that time, Satsuki was so distraught by the prospect of picking a fiancé, she asked Shindo, "How do you feel about me getting engaged?"

"Do you feel the same now...?" Satsuki's misty, narrowed eyes were on the verge of shedding tears. If she wasn't careful, she was bound to start wailing in a fountain of tears.

Shindo sorrowfully returned her gaze. His own heart wrenched with such agony, he wanted to break down crying himself.

"Miss...I..." Shindo hesitated. His hands briefly squeezed her arms tight, but then he thought better of it and pulled his hands away. "If it will make you happy...then I have nothing to say... Especially if it proves beneficial to the Tsujikawa legacy."

A massive wave crashed in Satsuki's heart.

Bang! The large French doors burst open and swung wildly back and forth! Yet there was no wind.

"So you're still saying the same thing..." Satsuki's voice trembled.

She was so upset, her powers lashed out. Recognizing as much, Shindo tried to coax her, but she would have none of it.

"My...happiness..." she faltered in a voice that no longer hid the sobs. Rustle...! Wind gushed into the room! "...can't be found..." she

continued, trailing off. Satsuki glared at Shindo, the tears dried from her eyes. And then...

The room was plunged into utter darkness with a loud clang.

“MISS!”

The room was shrouded in darkness. No, that wasn't quite right. The only conceivable explanation for the room to be engulfed in darkness was for the lights to go out. If that were the case, Shindo would still barely be able to see things in there. At the very least, he should be able to see the face of the girl right in front of him. But Shindo was blind as a bat! With his vision completely encompassed by darkness, all he could see was the color black. He couldn't see so much as a single speck of light.

“What's going on?”

In an attempt to see *something*, Shindo held his hand directly in front of eyes that were supposed to be wide open. But no matter how close he held his hand, it remained undetectable. Why, it wasn't the room that went dark at all. Shindo's eyes temporarily lost all sensory perception.

Shindo could feel movement in the air before him. Interpreting it to mean Satsuki was rising from the sofa, he extended both arms in an attempt to catch her. Alas, his arms flailed fruitlessly in the air before returning to his sides empty-handed.

“Miss?!” he cried, turning his head to either side; unable to see a thing.

Shindo knew all too well what was happening. The only person capable of doing this was Satsuki. She temporarily stole Shindo's sight.

“Where are you, Miss?!” Shindo demanded, futilely running his blind eyes across the area.

There was no doubt he was in Satsuki's room. He was certain she moved somewhere away from him. Never in a million years would he have believed Satsuki capable of something as heavy-handed as stealing his gift of sight. Yet that was exactly what she just did. What would possess her to do such a thing?

“Miss! Where did you go?!” Shindo shouted.

Why would Satsuki do that? The answer was obvious.

“Please come back! Miss!”

She wanted to vanish from his sight.

A sharp pain raced through Shindo's eyes, making him crumble to his knees as he cupped one hand across both eyes. After pressing against them for a few seconds, he removed his hand as the pain subsided. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

“...Miss...?”

Satsuki's familiar room appeared before him once more. His vision was fully restored. The sofa was now absent of her presence

however.

Shindo approached the French doors Satsuki opened with the turmoil in her heart and stepped onto the veranda. He placed his hands on the railing and checked to make sure she wasn't hiding to the left, right, or even beneath the railing. While blinded, he didn't sense her bedroom door open and close. If she went anywhere, it meant she jumped off the veranda.

The mansion was built with high ceilings, so even though this was only the second floor, it was still a formidable distance from the ground. Even Shindo would find recklessly jumping from such a height difficult if not for the bushes and shrubbery below.

On the other hand, it was an easy feat for Satsuki. She wouldn't even need to stop and think twice. All she had to do was slightly alter gravity's pull on her when she jumped. Why, she did just that on several occasions when she was little to sneak out of the mansion. Shindo had to put a stop to that bad habit by sternly telling her, "It would be bad if anyone saw, so don't do that anymore."

"Where...did the Miss go?" Shindo looked up at the sky from the veranda and asked the air.

Whenever Satsuki went missing, the trees, flowers, and air surrounding her very being always served as Shindo's ally. The trees would rustle, the wind would offer a gentle breeze, and the air would open the path to her. That was why Shindo could always find Satsuki when no one else could.

It was proof Satsuki gave her heart to Shindo in its entirety. Precisely because she loved and trusted him wholeheartedly, the air served as his ally. Because he was the one person she wanted to come find her, the wind and trees would lead the way. But now...there was no response.

"...Please tell me... I'm begging you..." The hushed rustling of leaves in the trees effortlessly drowned out Shindo's desperate whisper.

At the moment, Satsuki didn't even want Shindo to find her. She didn't want to see him. As a result, the air didn't come to his aid.

Wrought with frustration at not being able to find Satsuki, Shindo briefly dropped his head. But he quickly popped back up and studied his surroundings. Precisely because of all the time he spent at Satsuki's side, there were some things he knew about her. There were things he knew because the trees and air always assisted him.

For instance, the trees were acting "lonely." The only time the trees ever came across lonesome was when Satsuki wasn't on the property. In general, Satsuki leaving the property without Shindo was unthinkable. However, there was one place she would go on her own.

"Is that where she went...?"

Shindo jumped off the veranda.

THE sound of giggling and somewhat erotic moans wafted through the area.

“No, oh... Mmh...not there...” a woman’s voice teased childishly.

“You know you want it...” a man laughed as he chided her.

The couple’s voices could be heard from the bushes surrounding the fountain in the front courtyard of Tsujikawa mansion.

“I need to get back to work...” the man reluctantly reminded.

“Aw, can’t it wait a bit longer?”

Based on the contents of their conversation, they were in the midst of a tryst. Tsujikawa mansion employed a massive staff, from those who commuted to those who lived in the mansion. With a mixture of young men and women, it was hardly a surprise some were in intimate relationships. But when something randomly fell into the nearby bushes while magic was in the air, it had a way of spoiling the mood for their secret date.

“Eek!”

The young woman in her early-twenties pressed her maid uniform against her half-bared bosom, her body trembling in fear. The man in a gray suit who failed to fully bare her chest looked up in surprise.

Without a doubt, something just fell in the nearby shrubbery. Going by the loud thrashing and wild jostling of the bushes, this was no small planter that fell from a window. Those shrubs were directly beneath Satsuki’s room.

Did something happen to the Miss?! The moment the thought struck him, he hastily leapt from the shadows of the trees. This man had served Satsuki as long as Shindo. He was the attendant who replied, “Feel free to at any time,” when Satsuki claimed, “I’ll go tell everyone “Shindo’s being a bully”” earlier that afternoon.

He was the son born between the butler, Mizuno, and the head housekeeper, Shizuko. Along with his duties as Satsuki’s attendant, he also assisted his butler father in day-to-day activities. There would eventually come a day he inherited the role of head butler for the Tsujikawa household.

At the moment, he was still only thirty-five. It was no exaggeration to say he underwent training to become an attendant alongside Shindo. As a result of his father teaching them so much at the same time, the two knew one another inside and out. Perhaps that was why Shotaro Mizuno referred to Shindo with such casual familiarity.

“Akira?!” Shotaro cried in surprise upon seeing Shindo stumble out of the shrubbery. “Wh-What are you doing?! Did you just jump

from the Miss's room? What the heck happened?!"

Shindo was the highest ranking attendant. Consequentially, that made the slightly older man technically Shindo's subordinate. Yet their childhood upraising allowed Shotaro to act rather casual around Shindo.

"Don't tell me she pulled another vanishing act...?" Shotaro asked apprehensively.

Shindo gave a dry chuckle. "No, I have everything under control. Please don't let it trouble you..." Shindo replied, drawing out the last word as he caught sight of the maid hiding behind the tree.

"...Feel free to resume where you left off," he said considerately as he yanked Shotaro's halfway untied necktie. "But weren't you still on duty?"

"My apologies, sir!"

Shotaro couldn't balk at Shindo acting as his supervisor. Sliding the knot of his loosened tie to his neck, he tightened it before confirming, "Are you certain you don't need my assistance?"

He knew all too well that Shindo didn't require outside assistance where Satsuki was concerned. On the other hand, it was hardly normal for Shindo to jump out of Satsuki's window. It was only natural for Shotaro to show concern.

"I can handle it. Sorry for interrupting you," Shindo said and waved casually before darting away.

Shotaro heaved a heavy sigh. "Is that your way of saying the Miss is none of my business...? Is that it? Well, Akira?"

A somewhat pained expression crossed Shotaro's face as he furrowed his brow. They received the same training for years. And while their status differed, they both served as attendants at Satsuki's side. At the very least, he knew how Shindo felt for Satsuki.

He watched as Shindo raced into the distance for a while before realizing that the maid he abandoned behind the tree was doing much the same. He made a sarcastic snipe as he returned to her. "What? Did his good looks steal your heart?"

Without skipping a beat, she replied bluntly, "Huh? I'll pass on Mr. Shindo."

"That's unusual. A bunch of the young ladies here and at the office have their sights set on him."

"But doesn't he only have eyes for the Miss?" she asked, hitting the bull's eye. It left Shotaro completely speechless. "I wouldn't stand a chance against someone like her. Not only is he completely devoted to her, the guy never drops his guard," she continued. It was hard to say whether she was empowered by the boldness of youth or naturally candid. Comfortable in Shotaro's presence, the thoughts normally on her mind casually slipped out of her mouth. "So are Mr. Shindo and

the Miss lovers?"

This made Shotaro hastily cover his hand over her mouth. He figured it was probably okay, but nevertheless looked around to make sure no one overheard.

This maid was Noe, some business owner's third daughter. She started her maid apprenticeship at Tsujikawa mansion this spring. Having just graduated from junior college, she was only twenty. Shotaro couldn't help but knit his brows at the thought that Shindo and Satsuki were so close their relationship was obvious to such a young, new member of the staff.

"You've got to hide it better than this...Akira," he whispered.

"**SHINDO'S** so stupid..." Creak... The swing next to Satsuko cried on her behalf. "The jerk..." she muttered, tears welling in her eyes as the memory of him appeared in her mind. How many times had the tears formed in her eyes only to dry unshed?

At the moment, Satsuki was in a small park located behind the Tsujikawa mansion's massive property line. For such a small park, it was very pretty and well maintained.

There weren't any normal homes in the vicinity of the mansion. There were several small-scale mansions that were relatively large for Japan and some luxury high-rise apartments. Some of those residents came to this park despite its small size. Although it was here from the time Satsuki was a little girl, it never looked rundown.

As a child, Manabu frequently brought her here to play behind Shindo's back. Not allowed to leave the mansion without Shindo, this park was the one place she was able to visit on her own thanks to her cousin.

Satsuki was sitting on a normal swing. When she was little, Shindo once turned red in the face when he saw Manabu push her high on this very swing. He chastised Manabu, claiming, "It would be horrible if she fell!"

"Shindo...has always been a worrywart..."

From an early age, she was the only thing to enter Shindo's eyes. He only moved for Satsuki and only took action with her in mind. Even if the whole world found fault with her, he would be the only one to stand at her side for life.

"I belong to you in my entirety, Miss," he once said. True to his words, Shindo's world continually revolved around Satsuki. He wished for Satsuki's happiness. He protected Satsuki's smile. Everything he did, he did for Satsuki...

Creak... Satsuki forced the barely moving swing to a stop as a single, glistening tear finally slid down her cheek. Thoughts of Shindo brought back words she didn't want to remember, making them echo

in her ears. *"If it will make you happy...then I have nothing to say..."*

"Shindo..."

Her chest grew tight. Recollection of what he said made tears spill over one after the next. They streamed down her cheeks and tumbled like raindrops onto her dress.

What did I want Shindo to say? Satsuki sneered at herself. It felt as though the starry sky could absorb her as she gazed at it. The hazy moon emitted a dim light among a sea of glistening stars. They looked down on Satsuki, shedding what little light they could upon her.

"I don't approve of you having to pick a fiancé or me having to relinquish my position as retainer'... Is that what I wanted to hear?" Satsuki asked herself while facing the moon.

It answered in mimicry of her voice, "Yes, you did. You wanted him to disapprove of both."

Satsuki dismissed such desires with a sneer, "Ridiculous..."

That was ridiculous. It would never happen. Neither could voice such desires. Satsuki fully understood as much. She knew this day had to come eventually. As the only daughter to the Tsujikawa name, she knew what destiny ultimately held in store for her. It was drilled into her from the time she was a little girl. She was taught that someday she would pick a fiancé, get married, and give birth to an heir to ensure the Tsujikawa line prospered. They were among her important duties as an heiress.

She was prepared to accept her destiny from an early age, so why was it so painful? Why was it so excruciating?

"Shindo..."

Why does it hurt? What is excruciating? The fact that I have to pick a fiancé? No, that's not it...

"It..."

It hurts to have Shindo leave my side...

"I don't want to be separated from him..." she admitted.

The wind and trees chided Satsuki for openly expressing the truth in her heart that must never be voiced. The moon ridiculed her.

"MISS!"

Satsuki's ears were deceiving her yet again. She was certain of it.

"I knew I'd find you here."

A gentle breeze embraced Satsuki, slightly pushing the swing with a creak... Sensing someone next to her, Satsuki tilted her head to see who was standing there.

With the moon shining behind him, the kind face that looked at her in concern belonged to the man who could heal her heart unlike any other.

"How did you know I was here?" Satsuki quietly asked. There was no way the trees told him. She asked them not to tell a soul, not

even Shindo, where she went.

Shindo offered his same gentle smile as always and teasingly jostled the chains to the swing Satsuki was sitting on. Then he swooped in front of her and fell to his knees.

“How could I possibly not know where you are?” he answered.

Noticing the tearstains on Satsuki’s cheeks, Shindo’s heart was pained by the realization that she was crying.

“I will always be able to find you, even if no one else can,” he promised. He gently grasped Satsuki’s hands resting atop the skirt of her dress and held them tenderly against his chest. “Because I hold you dear...”



Satsuki's dried eyes brimmed with tears once more. She was happy that Shindo was the one who found her. Yet at the same time, it thrust the excruciating reality before her. It made her face the fact that she would be separated from the man who brought her such joy.

It wasn't as though she would never see him again. Shindo would still serve as a regular attendant. Eventually he would become her first secretary, assisting her as the Tsujikawa heiress. However, he would no longer get to spend every waking moment with her as he did now.

Satsuki took Shindo's presence as a matter of course. She took hearing his voice for granted.

Yet she would no longer get to be with the man who comforted her so. Once she decided on a fiancé, her days of playing the violin for Shindo would be gone.

"If you hold me dear...try to understand how I feel..." she insisted. The pain was so agonizing, it felt as if her chest would tear asunder.

On the other side of her tears, Shindo smiled softly at her in concern. She wanted him to accept her feelings more than anyone else in the world...

"I don't want to pick a fiancé..." Satsuki confessed, large teardrops falling down her cheeks. "I don't want to...part...from you, Shindo..."

Whoosh...! There was a gust of wind that was not a wind. The air blew in synchronization with the sorrow and uncertainty swaying Satsuki's heart.

"...How do you feel...?" she asked.

Rustle... Crackle...! The movement of air caused the trees in the park to stir. It was as if they were trying to stop Satsuki from acting on her emotions.

"Shindo...do you honestly believe I'll be happy without you?" she pushed.

The shock that assaulted Shindo was on par with a stake thrust into his heart. She wanted to know how he truly felt. *If I was prepared to cast everything aside and accept the possibility I may never see Satsuki again, I would probably shout, 'Of course that isn't how I feel!' And then, I would tell her those other forbidden words.*

"Shindo..." Satsuki's sad voice echoed in his heart. She was asking for an answer—his honest answer.

"I..." Shindo faltered, returning Satsuki's hands back to her lap. He could lose himself in her intelligent eyes. Shindo was forever unable to pull himself away from these eyes. He never could, and never would, now and forever... "I don't want to leave you, Miss," he answered.

Whoosh...! The air wavered violently, much like Satsuki's heart...

“Say it...again,” Satsuki requested.

Shindo felt as though he was losing himself in the gaze of her eyes as he broke the taboo once more. “I...don’t want to be separated from you, Miss.”

Whoosh...! Rustle...! The wind that was not a wind blew. The trees rustled. A gentle energy wave overcame the two as if the area surrounding them were cut and pasted into another dimension.

Satsuki’s heart was bursting with such joy, she could barely breathe. Shindo said that he didn’t want to be torn away from her! He told her how he truly felt. He expressed his personal feelings... It made Satsuki so happy, she didn’t know what to say.

“Really...?” she confirmed once more with her eyes locked on Shindo, wanting to ensure her happiness was real.

The light of the moon and stars shone upon them. The park lights served little use as the heavenly bodies illuminated the two confirming their innermost desires. Despite the darkness of night shrouding the park, Shindo could clearly see Satsuki, down to her beautiful, teary eyes. Likewise, Satsuki could clearly see Shindo, clear down to the gray tinge in his eyes that was only visible in the bright light of the sun.

“Shindo...”

At the sound of his name, Shindo pulled away from Satsuki’s hands. Kneeling before her, he quietly pulled Satsuki toward his chest.

“I can’t remain your retainer once you pick your future spouse...” Shindo whispered in her ear. His whisper indicated the depth of his words. “But...I don’t want to leave your side...”

A wavering air surrounded the two. It seemed to represent how Satsuki’s heart could melt from the onslaught of emotion bombarding her.

“Shindo, me too...” she confided. She rested her hands against his chest.

“However, I feel that I must leave your side.”

The wavering in the air came to a stop. The warmth surrounding them suddenly turned cold.

“Perhaps this is a good opportunity...to put some distance between us...”

“Shindo...!” Satsuki shrieked.

Furious with her retainer, Satsuki tried to pull away from him. However, he grabbed her and pulled her into a strong embrace!

“But...you just...said...you don’t want...to leave me...!” Satsuki cried, her voice trembling.

Held painfully tight in Shindo’s arms, she clawed at his suit. Yet she wasn’t the only one who wanted to burst out crying. Shindo was overcome with such grief, he wanted to scream and cry.

"I can't be with you anymore..."

"Shindo...!"

Unable to move her arms while caught in his embrace, Satsuki thrashed her wrists to strike at Shindo.

Why...? Why, Shindo? You just said you didn't want to leave me! Aren't I allowed to savor this dream?!

"If I remain at your side..." It tortured Shindo to force the words out. He had to defy his heart. "I...am bound..." his voice trembled at the mention of the sin he might commit, "...to personally corrupt you..."

The moonlight wavered, illuminating the two potential sinners.

"And that terrifies me," Shindo confessed, his words leaving Satsuki frozen.

Satsuki naturally understood the meaning behind those words. And to think, they came from Shindo. The beating in her heart pounded with terrifying ferocity. The implication behind Shindo's words was that he viewed Satsuki as a woman, not as his mistress.

"I have no right to do such a thing. I am hardly in a position to love you. Normally it would be unthinkable to even speak..." he cut himself short to pull her into a tight embrace, "...to speak...of such things..."

Shindo unhanded Satsuki, took a step back, and knelt once more. He dropped his head, and pressed his right hand against his chest.

"Please forgive what I said as jest. I would appreciate it if you graciously pretended I never said anything..." Shindo apologized to his little lady for accidentally expressing a fraction of what lied in his heart.

"Come here..." Satsuki commanded with both arms extended toward the man who just released her.

Shindo hesitated for a moment. This was the pose Satsuki struck whenever she wanted him to pick her up. Although it was always effortless for him in the past, it might prove somewhat painful to him now given the circumstances.

Shindo closed the step's distance he just created and took her proffered hands.

Just as always, he offered Satsuki the same gentle retainer smile meant for his mistress. Satsuki was overwrought with sorrow at the sight of Shindo acting like usual. Only moments ago, she heard him confess how he viewed her as a woman. Without giving her time to savor the moment, he was trying to reset everything back to normal.

"I can't even do this with you anymore...?" Satsuki asked. She took his proffered hand for granted. She simply expected his hand to be there for her if she reached out. But before long, he would no longer be able to hold his hand out for her. "I...won't get to hold your

hands..."

Shindo wouldn't get to stay at her side. The presence she took for granted, from his faint smile to the warmth of his hands, was going to leave her.

"I can't even be with you all the time..." she bemoaned.

Satsuki was so upset, she was unable to stop the tears from streaming down her cheeks. The sight of her tears was a shock to Shindo, who was trying to return to his usual self and resume a sense of normalcy. She was crying for Shindo.

The precious feeling brimming in his heart was beyond description. Those insuppressible feelings overflowed, flooding from his heart.

"Miss..."

Slipping his hands out of hers, Shindo pulled Satsuki into an embrace.

"...Shin...do..."

Held against his chest, he squeezed Satsuki tightly in his arms. This embrace was clearly different from the other times. Reading his emotions in the moment, Satsuki felt a soft, warm sensation come over her.

It wasn't as though one acted before the other. The two gazed deep into one another's eyes. And then, their lips locked...

"Shindo..." Satsuki whispered so quietly, it was barely audible. Slipping from the side of her mouth as she exhaled, her voice dissipated so rapidly that it hardly seemed real.

Creak... The swing Satsuki sat upon creaked as it slightly rocked. Each time they moved, the swing cried out quietly.

Satsuki allowed Shindo's lips to have their way with her. With eyes closed, she simply enjoyed the touch of his lips akin to a gentle breeze. That soft, warm touch pecked at her lips.

A richly enticing sensation ran through their bodies like electricity. It made Satsuki's entire body quiver.

"Are you cold?" By the time Satsuki realized the sound of Shindo's whispering voice was next to her ear, she felt hot breath from the lips he pulled from her mouth on her earlobe.

"...Mmm..." Satsuki's body visibly quivered. Shindo traced the edge of Satsuki's earlobe pressed between his lips with his tongue before moving his mouth along the length of her neck.

"Cold...? Why do you ask...?" Even the words coming out of Satsuki's mouth quivered. With each slight movement of Shindo's mouth, the swing chains grasped in her hands rattled and clanged.

"Because you're shivering..." Shindo replied somewhat teasingly the moment before his lips sucked at the nape of her neck with gentle force.

Satsuki's body quivered violently, making the swing chains issue the loudest moan yet.

"Meanie..." Satsuki falsely charged Shindo as she tilted her neck toward him to assist the path his lips followed; it was a clear display she accepted what he was doing. "I'm not...cold..."

"I know..." he replied.

Shindo found Satsuki so unbearably cute and adorable as she quivered in his arms. He naturally escalated under such feelings. Already holding Satsuki in an embrace, his hands reached for the zipper at the back of her dress and began to unzip it.

"Ah...!" By the time Satsuki let out an uncertain gasp, her zipper was already pulled halfway down her back. Although the dress once kept her fully concealed up to the neck, her flesh was now exposed down to the beautiful line of her collarbone.

"Shin...do..."

He brushed Satsuki's flushed cheeks as she looked up at him hesitantly before drawing his lips close. He said, "Please make sure not to make any noises."

Shindo's lips covered her mouth, absorbing the sweet sounds that nearly escaped from Satsuki out of embarrassment. He traced her exposed white shoulders with his fingertips, caressing her with his hands as he worked toward her neck.

"Shin...do!" she moaned.

Simply a few soft caresses were enough to fill Satsuki with uncertainty, making her body burn. Shindo's lips reluctantly pulled away from Satsuki's own lips only to travel from the length of her jawbone down her neck, ultimately reaching her collarbone.

"Ah, don't...!" Satsuki snapped, feeling embarrassed and slightly scared. Overcome by those two emotions, she was no longer able to keep quiet.

Due to recoiling excessively combined with the erratic movement of the swing, she lurched forward. Before she knew it, she was flung from the swing into Shindo's arms.

Rattle... Clatter... Clack...! The chains on the swing gave a metallic cry. With the chains ringing in the background, Shindo fell backwards to catch Satsuki. He rose into a sitting position with her still in his arms.

"Miss..."

Hands gently supported her back as Shindo held her.

"Shindo..." Satsuki airily whispered.

Being held against Shindo's chest filled her with a deliciously wonderful sensation. As she savored the moment, Shindo held her with gentle, tender love. It was as if she were the most important thing in the world to him.

But after a few minutes, he once again brought reality crashing down upon Satsuki as he said, "Now do you see? This is why I can't be with you..."

Unexpectedly thrust into reality by his question, Satsuki tried to ask to what he meant. But before she could, Shindo placed his hands on her waist and thrust her against his own. The moment she felt it, her body went stiff as a board with surprise.

"I would corrupt you... Do you understand what I mean by that...?" Shindo asked, turning his face skyward. He gazed at the moon, which seemed to look down on him in contempt for coming so close to sinning.

Somewhere between fear and hesitation, a horribly difficult to describe voice slipped from Satsuki's mouth.

"Don't you see...Miss?" Shindo pushed. Bathed in the moon's derisive laughter, Shindo continued to face the heavens. It was as if he was reconfirming his own foolishness. He was ridiculing himself for having unacceptable physical reactions toward his boss.

Satsuki was paralyzed in Shindo's arms. It was almost surprising how quickly the sweet daze lingering over her vanished without a trace, leaving behind embarrassment, hesitation...and a hint of fear.

"There is a part of me unable to view you as just my mistress..." Shindo confessed in a pained voice.

Moving his hands from her waist, Shindo pushed aside her waist-long hair as he slid the sleeves of the dress over shoulders that he personally bared. With a slow hand, he glided the zipper back up.

"I have no doubt...I would personally corrupt you... I cannot overcome this fear," he said, his words shaking Satsuki deep within her core. "I can tell that I would commit an unforgiveable sin..."

"...But I also..." Satsuki blurted, but was too embarrassed to finish.

Shindo realized what Satsuki was trying to say. He distanced his hips thrust against hers and pulled her away from his chest.

"Shindo..." She crumpled to the ground, having to support herself with both hands lest she collapse completely. With teary eyes, she looked up at Shindo.

Normally he would never leave Satsuki to sit on the filthy ground, yet he stood without so much as offering her a helpful hand. With eyes unable to hide his inner sorrow, Shindo looked down at her.

"Why...did you have to grow into such a beautiful young woman...?" Shindo asked in frustration, his voice slightly trembling. "...I cannot commit this sin..."

Craning her head, Satsuki could see the light of the moon shining behind Shindo.

"You are my lady for life," he said, his voice seeping deep into

her. "It is my duty as a member of your staff to wish for your happiness."

With his heart pushing him to the brink of tears, Shindo gazed into the young lady's fragile eyes that threatened to dissipate into the hazy darkness at any moment. This wasn't what he wanted to say. There were far, far more important words he wanted to share, but he buried them in his heart as he spoke the simple truth that neither wanted to hear.

"For the sake of your happiness...I will happily step down from my position as retainer."

Satsuki gasped with her mouth covered behind both hands. If she didn't cover her mouth, she feared she'd scream from shock.

"...Shin...do...?" She forced out his name, her chin slightly trembling. Her teeth clattered so violently one would have thought she was about to freeze to death. No, she was about to freeze. Her entire heart was freezing over.

Boom! Boom! There were two loud bangs as something broke before the park was thrown into even greater darkness. The two outdoor lamps near the swing set shattered to pieces one after the next!

Shindo knew it was Satsuki's troubled heart at work. Even though the look of shock as she hugged herself made it apparent what spurred the outburst, Shindo turned his back to her and looked up at the moon. Its light was even more heavily pronounced in the darkness.

"Please accept it...Miss." As he gazed at the moon, Shindo might have been saying that more for himself than for her. "Accept your fate..."

Satsuki simply stared in silence at Shindo as he spoke the words she never wanted to hear. This was her...fate. Her destiny was decided for her the moment she was born. She was obligated to accept this reality.

Satsuki was the heiress to the Tsujikawa legacy and Shindo's mistress. Shindo was Satsuki's retainer and loyal servant. Their relationship would never change. It must never change. They were forbidden to change it, even if they were drawn to each other... It was taboo to express their feelings for one another. To speak of such things was both immoral and prohibited. Such was their fate...

"Let's go back, Miss."

She slowly rose on her own and spoke in a ghost of a voice to his departing back, "You can corrupt me if you want to. We don't need anyone's permission..."

Whether he heard her or not, he didn't act on it.

Chapter 4: Tormented Angel

“I don’t want to go,” Satsuki declared.

Nearly all of the staff gathered to see her off were dumbstruck by the proclamation. Standing at the front to wish Satsuki a pleasant day at school, Tsubaki’s beautiful almond eyes widened in uncharacteristic surprise.

Satsuki made it all the way to the entrance hall in preparation to leave for school. The moment Shindo extended his hand out to her after pulling up the car, she made that startling declaration.

What could she mean by that? Everything about this entire situation, from rejecting Shindo’s proffered hand to refusing to go, was a first for her.

Noticing a dark shadow replacing Satsuki’s usually sunny smile, the staff wondered fretfully whether she was unwell. Two people knew where the true cause laid: Tsubaki and Shindo.

“I don’t want to go if Shindo drives me,” she elaborated, further surprising everyone, even Tsubaki, who had a rough idea of why her daughter was acting so unusual.

The only person not surprised was Shindo. He didn’t blame Satsuki for turning her head away and refusing to accept his extended hand. Withdrawing his hand, he called Shotaro from the throng of attendants who came to see Satsuki off.

“Mizuno, please drive us,” Shindo ordered.

“...Certainly,” Shotaro replied somewhat hesitantly. He stepped forward and extended his right hand to Satsuki before asking, “Would it be acceptable if I drove?”

Not deigning to answer him, Satsuki silently placed her right hand on his.

The moment Satsuki entrusted her hand to Shotaro, Shindo’s chest grew so tight, he thought it would explode. Always the one to take her hand, his right hand trembled in frustration. Satsuki just rejected him and allowed another man to escort her. He never realized how the loss of such an everyday occurrence would rattle his heart.

Shindo realized Satsuki was angry with him since they returned from the park the previous night. There were only about 220 yards between the park and the back gate that surrounded the Tsujikawa property. They maintained a fair distance apart as they spanned that stretch and cut across the backyard.

To be precise, Satsuki walked ahead with Shindo trailing directly

behind her. He never once tried to stand at her side. At one point on the way back, Satsuki turned to look at him with sadness etched into her features. Even so, Shindo refused to move next to her.

The strong belief in their hearts that “we must not touch” combined with the need to set far stricter boundaries than before created a deep emotional gap between them.

Satsuki wanted Shindo to acknowledge their feelings, even if he had to live in fear of “corrupting” her. She didn’t care if he—if they—fell into sin... Satsuki wanted Shindo to promise he would always be with her, but he refused.

Satsuki yearned to stay with Shindo, but he continued to remain true to his position as retainer...rejecting her feelings and advances. That left her devoid of anything but sorrow.

She began avoiding Shindo when he went to her room that day to bid her good morning—actually, she began the previous night. She had never avoided him like this before, not even once.

Now another man was touching Satsuki’s hand. The sight of another taking his place caused Shindo to frown, but he schooled his features so none would notice his inner turmoil. Turning to Tsubaki, who was seeing off her daughter, he offered her a slight bow and said, “If you will excuse me, I will accompany the Miss to school.”

Shindo was not the only one whose heart ached at the sight of Shotaro leading Satsuki by the hand. It tore at one of the maids seeing the Miss off. Still youthful, she came across as a cute young lady. But at the moment, she was also struck with sadness. Noe was the same woman who slipped into the bushes near the fountain with Shotaro the previous night.

What’s going on...? Are they bickering like an old married couple? I can’t believe it! Why does he have to lead her by the hand just because they got into a fight?! Thoughts clearly filled with jealousy lashed out at Satsuki.

“Eiyaa!” Noe’s scream filled the entrance hall.

Eyes flinging to the source of the sudden scream, a senior maid cried out in surprise, “Wh-What happened?!”

Noe held her right cheek in shock. Blood was streaming from a straight gash that ran across her cheek. It looked as if she had been slashed with a knife!

“Let’s go, Mizuno.” Satsuki didn’t even allow Shotaro time to check on his injured lover, urging the thunderstruck man along. If Satsuki told him it was time to go, he had no choice but to go. He couldn’t possibly drop her hand without permission and run to the side of his beloved.

“...Of course...” he replied. Filled with regret at not checking on his beloved Noe first, Shotaro reluctantly escorted Satsuki out the

door.

Meanwhile, the maids were thrown in an uproar.

“Did something fly at you?”

“Worry about that later! We need to patch her up first!”

“Are you okay? What happened?!”

No one knew how Noe got injured. They couldn't possibly know. Yet amidst the commotion, there was one who knew all too well how the injury came to be. He knew who drew the maid's blood. The answers were painfully clear to him.

“...Miss,” he whispered.

After observing the maids clamor about for a minute, he followed Satsuki out the door. Shindo had no doubt the injury was Satsuki's handiwork. He couldn't imagine her directly injuring someone aside from when her powers lashed out subconsciously. Satsuki's heart was on the verge of breaking. Shindo could feel it in his bones.

“**NO** way...” a girl whispered without thinking. Realizing how loud her voice sounded in the stillness, she quickly pressed her fingertips to her mouth. Yet those were the same words everyone present wanted to say.

The two who always painted such a dreamy picture were currently at the school entrance. Kneeling with the beautiful princess's hand in his, he would offer a kiss of devotion upon the top of her hand. The gentle smile adorning his handsome face would invite a beautiful smile from her. Each day, they performed that dreamy scene out of the pages of a fairy tale. Yet that ethereal sweetness was nowhere to be found today.

Satsuki's personal Benz stopped in front of the school entrance like always. All of the schoolgirls who happened to be in the schoolyard or school entrance waited with bated breath. They were eager for the “fairytale” to unfold before their eyes.

Shindo opened the backdoor to the Benz and offered his hand to Satsuki. However, Satsuki slid out of the car without accepting his assistance. As far as the throng of schoolgirls were concerned, that was a bolt from the blue. When the girl whispered, “No way...” she may as well have served as a representative, expressing the thoughts of all present.

Deprived of his express privilege, a deep chill crept into Shindo's hand traveling down to the fingertips and sending a shiver through his body. Satsuki glided past her retainer without so much as acknowledging his presence as she put the car behind her. Normally she would inquire about his plans for the day. Would he spend the day at her side or did he have to go to the office? Yet as Satsuki walked ahead of him, she showed no sign of stopping to wait up, let alone

asking for his agenda.

“Miss,” Shindo hastily called out as Satsuki was about to step through the front doors. She stopped dead in her tracks, her back still turned to him. Shindo bowed to her back and said, “I’m going to park the car. I shall remain on standby here all day, so please call for me if you need anything.”

Satsuki only deigned to respond with the curt reply, “Understood.”

What in the world? What’s going on?

Oh, whoa! Are those two having a fight? That’s not like Satsuki!

Poor Shindo... I wonder what happened.

The crowd of girls behind Satsuki flew into a whirl of prodding thoughts. Not bothering to wait for Shindo like she usually did, Satsuki slipped through the entrance doors.

Shindo’s shoulders drooped with a languished sigh. His little lady’s pointed avoidance was taking a remarkable toll on him.

With the intent to accompany Shotaro to the parking lot, Shindo opened the front passenger door to return to his seat. When he did, Shotaro called to Shindo from the driver’s seat, “Please head inside. I can park the car on my own. I will leave the keys with the parking security guard, so please retrieve it from him later. When the car from the mansion arrives, I will take that back.”

While on duty, Shotaro spoke politely to Shindo. But seeing Shindo hesitate, he slipped into his normal form of speech as he said, “Go stick by the Miss. Aren’t you the only one with that honor?”

“Yes, but...”

“If the Miss is still out of sorts when it’s time to go home, give me a call. I’ll give you two a lift.” Shotaro was trying to be nice since Satsuki wasn’t her usual self. There was no reason to let his kind consideration go to waste.

“Thank you,” Shindo said and closed the passenger door. Turning on his heel, he hurried after Satsuki.

Watching Shindo stride away through the passenger window, Shotaro whispered, “...Go get her...Akira...”

SATSUKI pushed her way into the school building as she greeted her peers. The moment Shindo stepped into the school entrance in hopes of catching up to her, a nervous girl greeted him, “Good morning, Mr. Shindo.” It was Alice.

No matter how big of a hurry he was in, Shindo couldn’t simply ignore the young lady. Coming to a stop, he offered her a slight bow as he returned, “Good morning, Miss Misakimori.”

The curiosity must have been killing her. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, she pounced on him so ferociously she barely

had time to breathe. "Say, is something the matter with Satsuki? She walked off on her own. I noticed she didn't seem herself... I'm worried!"

Alice was expressing concern for his little lady. Shindo offered her a grateful smile as he bowed. "I appreciate your concern. It would appear she is feeling a little under the weather, but I don't believe it will keep her from class."

"You're sure?"

"I am," Shindo replied with a smile that made Alice blush.

"Um...Mr. Shindo?" Alice began. She repositioned herself directly in front of Shindo, feasting her eyes on his somewhat melancholic visage. "If there is anything I can do for you, please feel free to let me know..."

"Miss Misakimori?"

"If I could be of assistance to you...I..." Alice trailed off, passion gleaming in the eyes she fixed on him. Neither had any way of knowing that Satsuki was watching the exchange from the shadows of the corridor connected to the entrance.

"I would happily step down from my position as retainer," Shindo had said. Those words wouldn't leave Satsuki's mind. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say they were constantly echoing in her head. As a result, the tumultuous feelings inside her only escalated. It made the door to her heart swing open against her will and her powers lash out with unfortunate consequence.

"I'm awful..." Satsuki said self-degradingly over constantly dwelling on what Shindo said when it only upset her.

She was sitting at her desk in the Student Council Room with her left hand on her forehead. Her shoulders were slumped as if she were unable to bear the weight of her emotions.

It wasn't as though she wanted to avoid Shindo. In fact, she wanted him to take her hand. She wanted him to talk to her. She wanted him to hug her tight. However, he wouldn't be able to do any of these things in the near future. And the fact that he already made peace with that saddened her.

Shindo was constantly at her side. Why did she have to cut his presence from her life...?

"For the sake of your happiness..."

"My happiness..." Immediately after the words came out of her mouth, her lips formed a depreciating sneer. "How could this be...for my happiness...?"

Shindo said that he would quit as her retainer for the sake of her happiness. But he was the one who was always there to protect her, comfort her, and fill her with happiness. And now he was about to

leave her side, all for the sake of her “happiness.” How could she possibly find happiness without him?

Pulling her hand away from her forehead, Satsuki raised her head and looked around the desolate Student Council Room. She lacked the gumption to attend class, but didn’t exactly feel like hiding out in her private suite. So her feet brought her here.

Only two weeks had passed since the gory mess Satsuki made here unbeknownst to the rest of the world. The air in the room was so gentle and crisp, it was hard to believe this was the same place where that nightmare took place. It never would have cleaned up so nicely without Shindo calling on the full might of the Tsujikawas.

She failed to keep her powers from going out of control back then. The fact that she killed a man still plagued her with nightmares. Each time one tormented her, Shindo would hold her in his arms, comforting her until she calmed down. He would soothe her by insisting it wasn’t her fault—she had no control over her powers when they went berserk.

With gentle strength, Shindo mended her heart... If it weren’t for him, Satsuki might have lost her hold on sanity after that incident.

“I...” As she absentmindedly turned her head to look across the room, Satsuki’s eyes fell upon a large whiteboard left on the meeting table. She barely reached out to it with her mind and... Snap! Pop...! Snap! Snap! The whiteboard made loud snaps as it split down the middle. Cracks ran throughout both halves, which crumbled to the floor! Broken and smashed, the sorry remains were scattered across the floor.

“I wonder...why...I have these powers...” Satsuki mused.

She never considered these powers to be a threat because she always had someone at her side who stopped her from going out of control. He protected her not only from outside enemies, but also from the greater enemy within.

“If I don’t have Shindo with me...” She tried to imagine what might happen, sending cold chills down her spine. If she didn’t have Shindo with her anymore, who would accept her for who she was, powers and all?

“Jeez, you pulled quite the number in here, didn’t you?” someone said from the glass doors right behind Satsuki. “I can’t believe you popped that weasel’s head off! Good going, Missy.”

Satsuki spun around. “Ah...” The tiny sound escaped her lips, her face tensing.

The Student Council Room was on the fourth floor. Although there was a spacious veranda on the other side of the glass doors, it wasn’t accessible from the outside. Nevertheless, that was precisely where he was standing.

“You look down in the dumps, Satsuki,” he drawled, sliding his finger across the metal frame. The supposedly locked doors popped open with a click. “Or are you just nervous with excitement for your birthday in two days?”

He stepped into the room with that characteristic sardonic grin plastered on his handsome face. The pressure change from throwing the doors open created a draft that stirred his soft, unruly hair.

Takemi Kaido stood before Satsuki.

“**SHE** hasn’t come by the classroom?” Shindo repeated in disbelief. That was impossible.

When he went inside to check on Satsuki in the classroom, Alice seemed distraught when she informed him of her absence.

“When I asked our classmates, they said they haven’t seen Satsuki yet either. Perhaps she hasn’t made her way here yet?” Alice explained to Shindo in front of their classroom door.

Only ten minutes until morning homeroom started. It was absurd that Satsuki wasn’t already in the classroom by now.

After dropping by their private suite, Shindo came to deliver Satsuki’s bag. Finding she wasn’t here, he wondered where she could be.

“I’m sorry to trouble you, Miss Misakimori, but could you take the Miss’s bag to her desk for me?” After Alice took the bag from Shindo, he offered her a grateful bow and started to leave in search of Satsuki.

“Um... Mr. Shindo,” Alice called to keep him from leaving. “I, uh, would like to help you...look for Satsuki, that is...”

Am I being too forward? Am I stepping out of my place? As such anxious thoughts raced through Alice’s head, Shindo offered her a considerate smile.

“Thank you, but class starts in ten minutes. I’m afraid I can’t take you up on that generous offer, but I appreciate the sentiment,” he said with another bob of the head before setting out down the hallway.

Satsuki wasn’t in her private suite or the classroom. Could she be in the library? Or the nurse’s office? Or perhaps... Shindo’s mind raced frantically. Alice felt her chest constrict as she watched him walk away.

“**MR.** Takemi...Kaido...” Satsuki whispered at the sight of the young man waltzing through the supposedly locked doors.

Hearing his name, Takemi raised an eyebrow, the cold smile never leaving his lips. “Did Alice tell you my name...? Nah...”

Satsuki jumped to her feet when Takemi marched over to her. He grabbed her chin and peered into her surprised eyes. “You heard

about me...as a marriage candidate, didn't you?"

Satsuki glared angrily at him. "Unhand me. That is hardly the way to treat a lady," she snapped firmly.

Takemi blew a bemused whistle as he let go of her chin. Satsuki sharply turned her head away from him.

"Aren't you betrothed to Alice? So why would you agree to participate in this arrangement?" Satsuki berated him.

"The great and mighty Tsujikawa picked me as a marriage candidate for the future president, Princess Satsuki! You seriously think anyone would pass up on such a juicy opportunity? When it was presented to my parents, they absolutely insisted that I come back to Japan. I've gotta admit, my parents are jumping for joy. They never dreamed I'd get picked for something like this," Takemi confessed somewhat sheepishly.

He stared at Satsuki's side profile a moment before continuing, "If this works out in my favor, we plan on calling off my engagement with Alice. The whole thing was a stupid arrangement struck in the heat of the moment between our families' companies, anyway."

"That's so insincere..." Satsuki reprimanded to his face, disgusted by the way Takemi described the situation.

"I've been searching for you for ages..." he said with a cold, penetrating look. It wasn't a baleful glare, but rather, a frighteningly keen gaze. It felt as if those sharp eyes could pierce into the innermost depths of her mind. "And I've finally found you at last...Satsuki."

Takemi mentioned something similar when they met the previous day. She had no idea what he meant. In fact, the things she didn't know about him outweighed those she did. Takemi's piercing gaze froze Satsuki in place. Even if she wanted to avert her eyes, would she be able to?

"Choose me, Satsuki."

"Huh?"

"Aren't there four other candidates? Don't bother with them. I'm the one you should pick."

"D-Don't be stupid... Why should I intentionally pick my classmate's fiancé?" Satsuki countered Takemi's abrasive order, but he ignored her argument and looked at the whiteboard she destroyed.

"Your powers are expanding beyond your childhood limitations," he observed.

Stunned into silence, Satsuki stared at Takemi in surprise. That proved it—this man knew of her psychic powers. And from the sound of it, his knowledge went back to her childhood. But how? The only people who were supposed to know were her parents and Shindo.

"At this rate, your continually magnifying powers will consume you... I'm the only one who can keep that from happening..." he

alluded.

“How do you know about that?” Satsuki demanded.

It was too late for denial. Would dismissing him with “What are you talking about?” have been for the best? If she laughed it off claiming, “You’ve watched too many movies,” have been better? No, neither was an option.

The look in Takemi’s eye made it all too clear. It said, “I know everything.” The underlying message in his voice asked a question of “What do you want to ask? What do you want me to tell you?”

“I know everything about you,” Takemi blatantly exposed, maintaining the cold smile upon his lips. “I’m the only one among your suitors who knows about those monstrous powers of yours. That’s why I’m telling you to pick me.”

With his chin slightly juttied up, he literally looked down his nose at Satsuki in condescension as he continued, “Wouldn’t you prefer a spouse who’s not only fully aware of your powers, but also capable of controlling them? If you don’t go for me, you’ll wind up consumed by your own powers and slaughter everyone.”

“...Bite your tongue...” Satsuki snapped, glowering at Takemi, her hands curling into fists.

She was well aware of the dangers her powers posed. That was precisely why she obeyed the rules imposed by Shindo and tried to be careful how she used them. But Takemi made it sound as if she could commit mass murder in a heartbeat. If that wasn’t the epitome of rudeness, what was?

“Do you wield powers of a similar nature?” she asked.

Doors opened for him when they should have remained closed. He didn’t bat an eye at the oddly destroyed whiteboard. Finally, it sounded like he knew about the tragic events that took place in the Student Council Room. After all of this, he might as well come clean.

If he wielded the same type of powers as Satsuki... If he possessed the ability to learn things that should normally be impossible to know... At least then, it would explain why he said he could stop Satsuki. Furthermore, if he was searching for someone with abilities similar to his throughout the years, it would clear up why he told Satsuki he had been searching for her.

Takemi didn’t answer Satsuki’s question regarding whether he wielded similar powers. Not so much as nodding in affirmation, he continued to look upon her with that frosty smile plastered on his face.

Satsuki opened the door to her heart. “...What?!” Her eyes flung open in surprise. The shock was so great, she forgot to breathe for a second.

The blood draining from her face, an uncharacteristic look of

dismay washed over her visage. Did she even notice the bead of cold sweat trickling down her temple?

"What's wrong?" Takemi asked with a big grin, looking down at Satsuki. His eyes were glued to the dismayed girl before him as he gloated.

...I can't read his mind... Satsuki panicked, her heart thrown into turmoil. For a brief moment, that turmoil disrupted the air around them so badly it outright felt sickening.

Satsuki tried to read Takemi's thoughts. She was going to search the recesses of his mind to pull on his memories. Doing so would provide all the answers she wanted. Was Takemi a psychic? If he was, what was the exact nature of his powers? What did he hope to gain from approaching her? Alas...

"That won't do you any good," Takemi concluded for her. Thrusting his right hand before her, he loudly snapped his fingers in front of her bulging eyes. As he did, agonizing pain raced through her head. Unable to so much as scream, Satsuki's knees gave out from under her. She tumbled onto her hands and knees.

An electric shock ran through Satsuki the moment Takemi snapped his fingers. It made needle-like pain pierce through her head.

"You can't read my mind," Takemi declared.

Satsuki held her head, still throbbing from the lingering pain. She tried to smooth her face wrenched in agony as she slowly raised her eyes from Takemi's feet.

"I have a shield in place to keep anyone from snooping around my mind. Unless your powers are stronger than mine, you can't see what's going on in here."

"...So you really do have powers like mine, don't you...?"

Takemi squatted in front of Satsuki and snatched her chin, taking full advantage of the fact the shock he rendered her brain prevented her from being able to stand. He confirmed, "Yep, just like you, I was born with them. And seeing as you can't read my mind, yours are weaker than mine."

"...Mine are weaker?"

"Wanna know just how strong mine are?" Takemi asked.

"...I suppose," Satsuki admitted. Struck with a sense of frustration, her voice quivered with her first taste of defeat. This was the first time in Satsuki's life she met somebody else who wielded similar powers. There was a part of her that wanted to know how great they were.

"Would you like me to show you?" Takemi offered teasingly. "I'm game, if it's between the sheets." Then he pressed his lips against hers.

Their lips touched... The moment they did, Satsuki swung her head to the side and shoved Takemi's chest. "Desist at once!" she

balked. "What were you thinking?! How dare you...suddenly-?!" Satsuki's eyes scornfully reproached Takemi as she floundered awkwardly from the sudden kiss.

Meanwhile, Takemi looked troubled as he said, "Jeez, you're one pain in the ass. I can't believe you're getting so worked up over a measly kiss. That was barely even a peck!"

"That's hardly the sort of thing you do to a lady in the spur of the moment!" Satsuki snarled back. She slowly stood up and supported herself by placing both hands on her desk. "It's uncouth..." She pressed one hand against her lips.

Their lips barely brushed. Nonetheless, it didn't change the fact that his lips touched hers. In an attempt to forget the sensation of his lips forced upon her, Satsuki bit her lower lip. She didn't want her body to remember how his lips felt when she could still recall the sensation of the deep kisses she shared with Shindo the previous night.

"I swear, rich chicks are in a class all of their own. Most girls would go 'No' or 'Stop it,' but you were all 'Desist at once,'" Takemi goaded, rising to his feet and brushing off his pants as if dismissing the entire event.

With a big grin, he stretched and asked, "Did you tell that retainer guy 'Desist at once,' too?"

Satsuki stared at him in surprise. Did he read her mind to find out she also kissed Shindo? If he did, then he knew that although only briefly, they had kissed with hearts as one. Her feelings for Shindo would no longer be a secret...

"What? I called it?" Takemi sniggered upon noticing Satsuki's reaction. "I didn't actually snoop around your mind all that much. I caught wind that 'Miss Satsuki and her retainer are a thing,' is all."

Takemi still didn't know about the forbidden love shared between the two.

He walked up to Satsuki and combed her beautiful, pitch-black hair with his fingertips. Her hair cascaded smoothly, slipping through his fingers. Soft and silky, simply the touch of her hair sent Takemi's senses reeling in a wave that started at his fingertips.

"Man, I'd love to see your hair spread out across the bed... I wonder how it'd ripple..." he mused.

"Please refrain from talking like that around me. That isn't the sort of thing you should casually mention in front of a lady, now is it? You're being extremely rude, Mr. Kaido," Satsuki chastised.

"Call me Takemi, Satsuki," Takemi said, presumptuously referring to Satsuki by her first name after she pointedly used his surname. Slipping the hand used to comb her hair around her shoulders, he pulled her into a side hug.

“For you to get so worked up over a measly little kiss, I bet you haven’t gone the whole way with that attendant yet, have you? It’s all the more reason for me to tousle your hair in bed as your future husband.”

“That is enough...!” Just as Satsuki was about to give Takemi a piece of her mind for his incessant crass remarks, a knock came from the Student Council Room door.

“Is anyone there? Satsuki, are you in there?” came Alice’s voice.

Class should have started by now, so what was she doing here? As if sensing the trouble that would ensue if he ran into Alice here and now, Takemi raced out the glass doors. After being left open all this time, the doors slammed shut the moment he made it over the threshold.

“I’m coming in,” Alice announced. Although no one answered her earlier, the door was unlocked. Figuring it would be best to check to make sure the room was indeed empty, Alice swung open the door. She found Satsuki standing in front of the desk in the supposedly vacant room.

“Satsuki...!” Alice cried. She quickly shut the door behind her and briskly strode to Satsuki.

“Alice, is something the matter? Shouldn’t class be in session by now?” Satsuki managed to muster a smile, suppressing the shock she suffered at the hands of Takemi. She intentionally avoided mentioning he was there only moments ago.

Normally that smile would fill Alice with a soft, airy sensation, but failing to give rise to such feelings in her this time, she shot a condemning look at Satsuki.

“What are you doing here, Satsuki? You know class has started! And do you have any idea how worried Mr. Shindo is about you? Any at all?” Alice rounded on her. *I feel just awful for Mr. Shindo. Why would she put him out like this?!*

“He is worried sick. He went to look for you in the library...but I believe he should be here soon,” Alice continued. *I’m so jealous of the way you make him lose his head!*

“What is going on, Satsuki?! You haven’t been yourself all morning. I’m worried about you!” her tirade continued. *I wonder what happened between her and Mr. Shindo. They usually get along so well... So well it makes me jealous at times...*

“But it isn’t right to upset Mr. Shindo like this,” Alice postulated. *Mr. Shindo takes such good care of you...*

The thoughts initially flowing from Alice brimmed with concern for Shindo and disappointment toward Satsuki for troubling him. Ultimately, they grew jealous in nature.

You get to keep his smile and arms all to yourself... What more could

you want?

"Alice..." Satsuki's voice dropped to a warning whisper as she repositioned herself to face the girl head on. Eyes burning with the flames of jealousy from the inner depths of her heart, she glared at Alice. "Do you love Shindo...that much?"

"Huh? Uh, what do you mean...?" Alice fumbled, thrown off by the unexpected question. "Ummm..." she hesitated, but could see from the way Satsuki looked at her that her classmate was serious. The expression on her face made it clear she wanted an honest answer.

Averting her gaze from Satsuki, Alice dropped her eyes with flushed cheeks as she answered, "...Yes, I love him."

Something in Satsuki's heart snapped with a loud crack.

"I know it isn't right to have feelings for the man serving as your retainer... Please find it in your heart to forgive me," Alice apologized. *I've loved him since I first laid eyes on him. He's the first true gentleman I've ever met...*

"It's why I look forward to seeing the two of you come to school every day. When you come, it means I get to see him," Alice confessed. *Although it's really annoying the way you show off how close you are...*

"That's why I hate to see Mr. Shindo put out so much," Alice explained. *Just because he's your retainer is no excuse to give him a hard time. I think you're acting like a spoiled brat.*

"He seemed troubled again today, so I... I knew class was about to start, but I wanted to be of some help to Mr. Shindo, if even a little... So I set out to look for you..." *Why are you giving Mr. Shindo a hard time? You're being simply awful!*

Envy toward Satsuki bloomed in Alice's heart, giving rise to jealousy. Condemnation akin to hatred was short to follow. Those emotions flowed into Satsuki unabated, eating at her heart.

"Alice," Satsuki said in a voice that came across as cold to the other girl. "Don't you have a... fiancé?"

Alice raised her head with a gasp. Satsuki was glaring more haughtily than she had ever seen before. Intimidated by her imposing air, Alice stiffened.

"You're attracted to Shindo when you already have a fiancé? Wouldn't you consider that being insincere?" Satsuki demanded, ice dripping from her words.

"Uh, well..." Alice tried to defend herself, but couldn't force the words out under Satsuki's icy stare.

"I can't believe your heart is pining after another when you've already been promised to one man... It's scandalous..." Satsuki sneered.

"No..." Alice whimpered. *You're cruel, Satsuki... I really do love*

Mr. Shindo...!

Alice's heart screamed louder as if to make up for her fumbling mouth. But the words of her heart—how she truly felt—only served to rattle Satsuki to the core.

I love Mr. Shindo. I have since I was a first year... I've loved him ever since I saw him when I first enrolled in this school... What is so wrong with that? I just fell in love with Mr. Shindo is all!

Tearing her eyes away from the girl, Satsuki had to hold herself up with her hands on the desk. Among Alice's thoughts, there was one word that greatly upset Satsuki's own heart. It was the word "love."

Kaido is only my fiancé in name. I only love Mr. Shindo! Alice's thoughts were accompanied by mental images of Shindo. One was of him smiling gently. Of him smiling when he talked to her. Of when he set her heart aflutter that time he first took her hand.

I love Mr. Shindo. I love him... I couldn't care less about that fiancé.

Crack... Crack... The cracking sound came from Satsuki's heart. It was the sound of the word enclosed in an unbreakable glass case fighting to get out. It was the word "love." Suffering in agony in that glass case, it was going berserk.

That was the one word Satsuki could never say. Not to Shindo. It was forbidden to tell him that. She could never say it to him. Buried in a glass case deep in her heart, Satsuki could never release this word.

It didn't matter how much "I love you..." filled her thoughts. Regardless how badly her heart was tormented with the desire to utter those words, she couldn't.

I love Mr. Shindo!

It was prohibited for Satsuki to ever say such a thing.

"Stop it..." Satsuki whispered with tears in her eyes. Her chest was filled with such horrible agony, she couldn't breathe.

"Don't..." she forced out. Why couldn't she say it? "Don't look at Shindo like that!"

The moment Satsuki shouted, a heavy pressure crashed upon the air in the room! Under the crushing air pressure, Alice nearly lost her hold on consciousness. As she struggled to stay conscious, pieces of the broken whiteboard turned into sharp, deadly weapons that flew toward her...!

"**MISS?**" Shindo said with a gasp. He sensed an awful aura with acute clarity. It was as if an oppressive air was crushing down on him. He only ever felt this dark aura expand outward from Satsuki when she used her abilities in anger.

Straining his ears in the silence, he slowly scanned his surroundings. The sensation struck in the corridor that connected to the main building on his way back from the library.

Satsuki wasn't in either the nurse's office or library. The only other place that came to mind was the Student Council Room. But memories of that horrible accident were still so raw, he found it hard to believe she would willingly visit the room where she was assaulted. Assuming she would never go there on her own, Shindo saved it for last.

Did the Miss use her powers? Why would she use them now? Shindo asked himself, but there was no time to work out the answers. Taking advantage of the empty halls, Shindo raced to the Student Council Room!

THE air bore heavily on Alice. Unable to withstand the pressure, she crumbled to the floor with her eyes glassed over. Satsuki's powers made the remnants of the broken whiteboard fly towards the girl!

The pieces of whiteboard were going to tear Alice to shreds. That way, she would never be able to flaunt the feelings she harbored for Shindo ever again. Her mouth would never be able to call Shindo's name. The word "love" would never pass through those lips or fill Alice's thoughts and hurt Satsuki again.

Satsuki's heart was struck by a flash of sadness, self-pity, and intense jealousy. Overpowered by these emotions, her powers lashed out in a mad rage bent on destroying Alice! By the time Satsuki realized what she was about to do, and consciously tried to rein her power in, it was already too late.

"Satsuki!" The angry yell drew Satsuki's attention.

The glass doors burst open and Takemi jumped into the room. He immediately turned his attention to Alice, who was about to fall prey to Satsuki's rampaging powers.

Takemi gasped as he directed a piercing air toward her that made her shrink back.



KA-BOOM! There was a burst of air that made the energy waves vanish in a sudden rush of air. The deadly shards inches from Alice disintegrated into sand!

With the sound of falling sand, the oppressive air returned to normal. The breeze entering through the open doors swirled about the room to purify the space. The room regained its tranquil atmosphere as if nothing had ever happened.

But Alice was unconscious on the floor. Satsuki stood ghastly pale. Takemi was staring daggers at her. Aside from these three, the room made for a perfectly normal sight except for the pile of sand on the ground.

“Don’t act like a spoiled little brat! Can’t you even control your own damn emotions?! I’m amazed you haven’t managed to get yourself killed by now!” Takemi shouted as he roughly grabbed Satsuki by the arm.

“Do you realize what would have happened if I wasn’t here?! You would have killed Alice, that’s what! Do you want to kill yet another person in this room?!”

Her face pale, Satsuki began to tremble. She was horribly shaken by the word “kill.” The sight of Satsuki’s blood draining from her face made Takemi click his tongue in annoyance. “...You’re way too pampered... Sheesh!”

There was no denying the fact that Takemi put a stop to Satsuki’s outburst. If it wasn’t for him, a repeat of the other day would have unfolded in this very room—this time to an innocent.

“I...” Satsuki whispered with teary eyes. She turned away from Takemi to behold the unconscious girl.

Alice was accepted into the high school through the general entrance exam while Satsuki bypassed it. The two girls were together from day one of their high school careers. As fellow members of the Student Council, it was fair to say they were particularly close.

With a gentle air of familiarity, Alice was a very sweet girl who cared for others. Although few were terribly friendly to Satsuki because of her status and demeanor, Alice was completely uninhibited, treating her completely normal. She’d say, “Satsuki,” with a beaming smile. And Satsuki just tried to take that girl’s life...with blind jealousy taking over her powers.

Alice was so honest to herself! She could openly confess that she “loved” Shindo. Meanwhile, Satsuki was forbidden to utter that very word. It tore at her heart. It filled her with so much self-pity.

“I...am...sorry...” Satsuki weakly apologized to Alice, her arm still in Takemi’s grasp. The tears streaming down her cheeks were shed over her own foolishness.

The door to the Student Council Room suddenly burst open.

Before she had time to see who it was, Satsuki's arm was torn from Takemi's grasp. She was pulled into the embrace of another.

"I would appreciate if you refrained from placing your hands on the Miss."

Holding one arm, the man who met Takemi's icy stare with piercing eyes of his own was none other than Shindo.

"Haven't you heard? I'm one of Satsuki's suitors," Takemi snickered while pointing at himself with his thumb. His voice rang boastful to Shindo's ears.

"I've heard, but that doesn't mean she has chosen you, Mr. Kaido. As you are still merely a candidate, please refrain from stepping out of line," Shindo advised as Satsuki's retainer and bodyguard, completely unfazed by Takemi's arrogant demeanor.

A big smirk spread across Takemi's lips. With the tip of his thumb, he tapped his lips several times, "Stepping out of line...eh?"

The implication behind Takemi's words caused Shindo to raise an eyebrow and Satsuki to look at Takemi in horror. She was terrified he was going to mention the kiss right in front of Shindo. She couldn't bear the idea of Shindo knowing another man stole her lips.

"Hey... Aren't you that Shindo guy?" Takemi asked, proving Satsuki's fears unfounded as he showed no sign of spilling her innermost secrets. Hands shoved into his pockets, he ran his eyes across every inch of Shindo's body.

"The only son born to an upper-class Japanese family that immigrated to Hawaii. After losing both parents in an unfortunate accident at the age of twelve, you were alone in the world with no other family to turn to. Thereafter, you were received into the home of your old family friend, the Tsujikawas, as the retainer for their newborn daughter. I'll admit, you had decent enough heritage and social status to make the cut to become the retainer for the corporation's next in line. And thus, you've spent even more time with Satsuki than her own two parents these past eighteen years...as her attendant, retainer, and bodyguard... Does that about sum it up?"

"You looked into me? It's an honor to have you take such interest in me," Shindo replied smoothly.

After disclosing Shindo's false background, Takemi's eyes darted toward the girl held in her retainer's protective embrace before returning his gaze.

"I don't know how precious this princess is, but you're spoiling her rotten. Can't you see that?" Takemi spat.

"While I appreciate your concern, I must say, even in the eyes of a lowly retainer, the Miss is an extremely kind young lady who always remembers to treat those around her with compassion. She is by no means spoiled—"

“Spare me the exposition! I’m telling you up straight, you are pampering her way too much! You’re doin’ every single damn thing for her. Watcha gonna do next? Teach her how to have sex?”

The one most taken aback by Takemi’s wild accusation was Satsuki. “M-Mr. Kaido!” she cried. She tried to pull away from Shindo’s arm to argue with him, but his arm didn’t so much as budge.

Meanwhile, Shindo was not about to let Takemi get a rise of out him. If he retaliated, the other boy would undoubtedly poke fun by jeering, “What? You’re the retainer constantly glued to the young woman!”

Apparently Takemi expected Shindo to blow up at him, so he looked a bit disappointed when Shindo simply replied, “I’ll leave that to your imagination,” with a bow.

“Look,” Takemi said as he squatted next to the unconscious Alice. He looked up at Shindo and jutted his chin toward Satsuki, still held in her retainer’s grasp. “Satsuki doesn’t know how to control her own powers because you’ve pampered her so much. That’s why she loses control of them. She nearly killed Alice a minute ago.”

“What?!” Shindo gasped and looked down at Satsuki in surprise before returning his gaze to Takemi.

“You may have kept an eye on Satsuki all these years to keep her powers in check, but that doesn’t cut it. If they went totally haywire, you couldn’t do a damn thing about it. Do you know why? Because you’re a normal person without any special powers of your own,” Takemi explained.

“How did you learn about her powers?” Shindo asked, figuring out Takemi knew of Satsuki’s psychic abilities from the way he spoke.

How did Takemi come to learn that Satsuki possessed special powers? It was a secret that only her parents and Shindo knew about.

The tip of Takemi’s lips curled into a smile. He shifted his attention to Satsuki, looking at her with an air of nostalgia. “I’ve met her before...”

Gentleness flashed across Takemi’s eyes as he gazed upon Satsuki. “A long time ago...Satsuki saved me...”

It was a precious memory he held dear. His expression briefly softened as he relived that memory only for his former stern countenance to swiftly replace it.

Takemi just claimed Satsuki saved him, but she didn’t know what he meant. She had absolutely no memory of ever meeting him as a child.

“You can’t remember, can you, Satsuki?” Takemi asked.

For the life of her, Satsuki couldn’t evoke any childhood memories of Takemi. She was thrown off balance, unsure what it could mean.

Seeing Satsuki wrack her mind in confusion, Takemi provided the reason as to why she couldn't summon forth the previously mentioned memories. "It's only natural you don't remember. See, I sealed those memories away."

Not only was Satsuki shocked, so was Shindo. This was the first he heard that Takemi was also psychic.

Turning away from the two, Takemi placed his hand on Alice's forehead. "I'm going to erase Alice's memories."

The space surrounding Alice distorted for a moment. Sensing irregular energy wafting off of Takemi, Satsuki squinted.

"I'm going to erase everything she just saw and felt here. Hell, I'm gonna outright erase the entire memory of her coming to this Student Council Room. If we put her on one of the beds in the nurse's office, we can make up something along the lines that she passed out while searching for Satsuki," Takemi said, casting a quick look at Satsuki.

For the first time since they met, he sounded kind as he asked, "I'm gonna return the favor I still owe you from back then, Satsuki. If you want, I'm willing to erase the 'love' in Alice that could trigger another outburst."

Beginning to feel her own foolishness, Satsuki was struck speechless.

"As long as Alice holds onto her love for that retainer of yours, there's no telling when you'll go into another jealous rage like a spoiled brat over her inner thoughts and feelings. Don't you think it'd be best to seal it away so that doesn't happen?"

Shindo looked down at Satsuki and pulled her head toward his chest with his free hand. Now he knew why she tried to harm Alice.

It was by no means a good thing that Satsuki tried to hurt Alice. Yet Shindo couldn't deny that somewhere in his heart, it made him happy to know she reacted that way over him.

"...You don't need to do that..." Satsuki responded in a sad voice. Held in Shindo's protective embrace, she clutched at his suit with both hands and closed her eyes. "You don't need to erase that. Please don't."

"Don't blame me if you lose control again," Takemi replied. He looked at Satsuki clinging to Shindo with her back turned toward him as he whispered with a sigh, "Fine. I'm only going to erase what transpired in here from Alice's memories. Sound good?"

If he erased the love Alice felt for Shindo, it would probably lighten the emotional burden on Satsuki to a degree. It would reduce the number of girls who looked yearningly at Shindo by one.

But it was simply unacceptable for someone to crush another's feeling of "love." No one had the right to intentionally steal the

wonderfully warm and gentle emotion that filled a person with euphoria as their heart sought another.

Satsuki was jealous of Alice. She was jealous of how the girl could openly think and express her love. Such actions—and thoughts—were forbidden to her.

How she wished to openly express her love. If only she could split open this shell of a body that constantly encaged those magical words, grab the glass case buried in the depths of her heart where they continually fought to break free, and pull them out... It would be so wonderful. So joyous! But she couldn't bring herself to do it. That was precisely why Satsuki didn't want Takemi to erase the love Alice harbored in her heart for Shindo.

Removing his hand from Alice's forehead, Takemi lifted her up. "I'm taking her to the nurse's office. I'll make up some story about how she started to feel sick and passed out when I came to see her."

Shindo lowered his head in a bow as Kaido headed toward the door. "Thank you, Mr. Kaido." Already behind the retainer by this point, the words stopped Takemi in his tracks. "I genuinely appreciate all of the assistance you have provided the Miss." Regardless of how he did it, it was true Takemi helped Satsuki. As her retainer, Shindo was obligated to express his appreciation.

Takemi, on the other hand, didn't so much as bother to turn around as he told Shindo, "Satsuki will be mine. Don't you forget it."

His head still lowered in a bow, Shindo stiffened as he clutched one hand. He accidentally tightened his grip with the hand wrapped around Satsuki, relaying the distress in his heart. Surprised, she looked up at him.

"Later! I'll see you at the birthday party in two days," Takemi declared before disappearing from the room while carrying Alice. Rather than keep her eyes transfixed on his back as he strode away, Satsuki couldn't pull her eyes away from Shindo's side profile—his pained and frustrated—side profile.

"Shin...do...?" she called, gently touching the side of his face. In all their time together, had she ever seen him make an expression this out of character before? At Satsuki's touch, Shindo offered a small smile as if reprimanding himself for nearly losing control. Releasing her from his protective arm, he fell to one knee before her and lowered his head.

"I am terribly sorry. It would appear you endured great strife because I was unable to be there for you," Shindo apologized. It wasn't his fault. Satsuki was the one who disappeared. Nevertheless, he took all of the blame. "It's my duty to constantly remain at your side and protect you. It's a sign of my own incompetence when hardship falls upon you. Although I am prepared to accept any

punishment you see fit, please show mercy on me.”

His mind was still repeating Takemi’s parting words, “*Satsuki will be mine.*”

He was one of Satsuki’s suitors. With a background similar to that of Tsukasa, his talents earned him a place of respect among the rest of the Kaidos. Above all else, he not only possessed the same type of psychic abilities as Satsuki, they were at a magnitude capable of stopping hers when they went out of control.

There was a very strong chance Satsuki would choose Takemi Kaido. She would pull away from Shindo. He would have to see her walk holding hands with another man every day. The day she would smile at another man and give her body to him was—nigh.

“Shindo...” Satsuki fell down to her knees before her retainer as his thoughts grew increasingly dark and frenzied. “I’m sorry...about how I’ve treated you all morning. It felt like you were pushing me away last night... I felt lonely...”

Shindo raised his head. When he did, his chest was filled with such pain, he could barely breathe. He was met with such a forlorn expression on Satsuki, it felt as if her life were ephemeral, doomed to end at any moment.

“I’m sorry...” she apologized in a pained voice that quivered. She sounded like she was about to break into sobs.

With each passing day, Shindo’s love for Satsuki only grew stronger. Each day, he stuffed that love into the depths of his heart. That was how he got through life so far. Could he bear to endure more than he already did? It didn’t help knowing there would soon come a day when she offered her hand to another man, smiled at him, and gave herself to him each night.

“I’m willing to accept my destiny... But I want you to stay at my side, Shindo...” Satsuki continued in a trembling voice with tears forming in her eyes. “Because...I...” she floundered. She yearned to say it. She desperately wanted to force the words out of her mouth.

“Miss...” Shindo cooed as he extended his arms, pulling Satsuki into a strong, yet gentle, embrace.

“Shin...do...” Satsuki clung to Shindo as tears ran down her porcelain-white cheeks.

Shindo’s deep voice reverberated through her body, wrought with such pain and suffering it felt as if her emotions could tear it asunder. “If I could make love with you right here and now...I would happily fall to the depths of hell...”

“Then let’s fall into the depths of hell together... Meet me tonight within the secret confines of the wisteria...” Satsuki invited, creating a forbidden promise between them.

It was outright cruel how sweetly those words rung. Their

passions didn't have long left to wait to be fulfilled.

"**HAVE** a nice day, Miss." Shotaro's rich voice echoed in the entrance hall as he took a step before the line of attendants. None of the attendants, maids, or even her mother who came to see her off, could hide their relieved smiles.

"Well, I'm off!" Satsuki replied in a beautiful voice. Her right hand was firmly held by Shindo as he escorted her.

There was no hint of the dark aura from the previous day. Satsuki was back to her usual, kind self, emitting an aura that could raise spirits simply by looking at her. People raved that she was "delicate as a flower, beautiful as an angel." She was proving it to be true.

Satsuki went to school yesterday emitting rancorous vibes. Something must have happened since, for she proceeded to turn around and return to the mansion that very morning. If that weren't surprising enough, she came back held in Shindo's arms!

Although everyone was afraid she had fallen ill, they were also struck with a wave of relief. The strained atmosphere surrounding Satsuki that morning had dissipated. Held in Shindo's arms, her expression when she returned seemed softer. Although somewhat down, it was clear she was back to her usual self. Above all else, everyone was relieved to see she returned with Shindo tending to her.

"Wait, Shindo." Just as she was about to go out the door, Satsuki stopped as if she remembered something at the last minute and pulled her hand free of Shindo's grasp as she turned around.

Everyone wondered what was wrong as they watched over her in silence. Satsuki came to stand before the young maid she injured the previous morning at the end of the procession.

"Is your injury going to be okay? Does it hurt?" Satsuki asked, brushing her fingers against the large Band-Aid on Noe's cheek. "I hope it doesn't leave a scar. I'll pray it heals quickly for you!" It was her fault the maid got hurt to begin with. Satsuki smiled apologetically at her.

All those watching sighed as if to say, "The Miss is so wonderful!" over her display of kind consideration, but Noe was horribly shaken by the encounter. This was the first time Satsuki ever spoke to her personally, let alone touched her!

"Th-Thank you...for your kindness..." It took all she had just to force that out.

The gentle breeze surrounding Satsuki enveloped the whole room.

IN front of the school entrance, the sighs that filled the air may very

well have been sighs of relief. Admiration, envy, and above all else, tender relief consumed the throng of schoolgirls.

The princess and her knight had returned. As always, the princess graced her knight with an elegant smile as he offered a kiss of devotion upon her hand. O how the girls yearned to behold this scene after being deprived of it yesterday. They loved to watch the forbidden fairy tale unfold.

“Satsuki, good morning!” Immediately after Shindo left to park the car, Alice ran up to greet Satsuki as she did most mornings.

“How are you feeling today? Is it true you went home early yesterday after all? I was worried about you,” Alice said to her, chipper as ever. It seemed like Takemi truly did erase the events of yesterday from her mind.

“Yes, but I’m fine. Are you sure you’re okay? I heard you collapsed during your meeting with Mr. Kaido,” Satsuki replied, pretending as if nothing had happened.

Feeling a bit awkward that such news traveled all the way to Satsuki, Alice looked embarrassed as she shrugged her shoulders. “I’m okay. But...I don’t actually remember ever seeing Kaido. I guess I wasn’t feeling too great yesterday. It’s all a blur...”

“I see... Take it easy, okay?”

Simply the sight of Alice was enough to nearly replay memories of the sin Satsuki almost committed the previous day. But the next words out of Alice’s mouth put a stop to her increasingly negative thoughts. “I hope you have a pleasant day today as well, Satsuki. It is the eve of your birthday, after all! I’m looking forward to the party.”

Satsuki would soon turn eighteen. She would meet her suitors at the party. And a month thereafter, she would have to choose one of them. Then Shindo would quit his job as her retainer. The hourglass indicating the time limit before they were split apart would turn over tomorrow. In a month, Shindo would no longer stand constantly at her side. So she decided to give her all to him before that happened.

“**ISN’T** it pretty...?” Satsuki whispered, looking up at the wisteria from where she sat beneath the lattice a half an hour before she usually went to bed. She had invited Shindo here with one purpose in mind—their secret promise to finally be united before they were torn asunder.

The flowers were in full bloom. The pale purple petals danced over her head as they tumbled down. It was as if they were welcoming her mission there.

“With you sitting here, the wisteria look even more beautiful,” Shindo complimented. He held his hand up to one of the wisteria flowers dangling from the trellis and seared the beauty of the flower

into his eye before returning his attention to Satsuki. His thoughts prioritized Satsuki over the newly ingrained beauty of the flowers and overwrote it with her image.

"I first met you here, Shindo..." Satsuki's eyes filled with gentle remembrance of that day. "I knew the moment I saw you... I knew I wouldn't want you to ever leave me. I...fell...in love with you...at first sight..."

Whoosh... The petals that fell around Satsuki slowly drifted up and swirled about her.

"And then I came to expect that you would be at my side forever. It became normal for me to lock those thoughts and words deep within my heart... I had to keep them...locked away..." Satsuki said slowly as if talking in a dream. As she revealed her innermost thoughts, Shindo knelt beside her.

"As I grew aware of my destiny...those words began to struggle to break out of me."

Rustle...! The wisteria overhead shook violently. The vines were trying to stop her from saying more—from committing the sin she longed to commit.

"But let me tell you...Shindo." Her voice quivered as she formed a smile. "I..." the word came out tremulous. In hopes of offering her support, Shindo cupped her cheeks in his hands.

The wisteria shook and rattled wildly. Despite the wisteria's best efforts, Satsuki pushed forward. Gazing into Shindo's eyes, Satsuki saw how they overflowed with love for her. Pouring all of the love throughout the years into her words, Satsuki declared, "I...love...you..."

Rustle! The wisteria grew tumultuous, scattering petals across the two. As if in an attempt to hide them, the petals completely surrounded them as they fell to the earth only to rise up once more. The wisteria stirred noisily in hopes of preventing them from saying more. The surrounding trees came to its assistance.

"I love you too, Miss..." Shindo's confession reached Satsuki's ears unhindered by the ruckus of the trees and wisteria. She heard him loud and clear.

Shindo pulled Satsuki toward him and the two kissed. As they engaged in a long, long kiss, the wisteria trembled happily, yet also sadly, as it rained petals over the couple.

"Shin...do..." Satsuki's dreamy voice escaped from her lips as they pulled from the kiss. She called his name in an impassioned voice, wanting him.

"Miss..." he also whispered passionately, equally desiring her. His hands ran over the length of her body, treasuring her every curve.

Swish...! The wisteria flowers scattered across the ground burst

into the air. In the middle of the petal storm, the two fell upon each other.

“I’ve loved you...and only you...all these years.” Words like from out of a dream echoed in Satsuki’s ears. “I love you...”

Overjoyed by Shindo’s passionate words of love, Satsuki felt as if her heart and body could soar. She didn’t even notice when her dress or Shindo’s suit were cast off into the pile of wisteria petals, which were quickly buried under a new pile of petals.

“I love you...Shindo...” Satsuki’s body yearned to release the words again and again. In a passionate frenzy, Satsuki acted on that desire by pulling him into a kiss and running her hands along his tempered abs. “I love you... I love you so much...”

Shindo’s hands left no inch of Satsuki’s flesh unexplored, filling her with a sense of pleasure unlike anything she ever felt before. Bewildered by her first experience with sexual euphoria, Satsuki covered her mouth with both hands to keep her voice from slipping out.

But Shindo lowered her hands and smiled gently down at her. “...You’re free to make all the noise you like... I personally find that more enjoyable.”

“Shindo...” Satsuki pouted, feeling as though he was teasing her. Nevertheless, she was quick to take him up on the offer.

The wisteria flowers stopped stirring...and quietly shed their petals.

“I love you...Miss...”

“Shin...do...”

Under the protective watch of the wisteria flowers, the two finally became one. As if shedding tears, the wisteria rained its petals upon them. Its petals fell in a flurry of pity for the two lovers.

They would only make the other suffer with their hearts interlocked. This would only bring them pain. Yet they nonetheless plunged headlong into each other’s naked embrace in an evening of passionate lovemaking. Because they knew their time together was running short.

They had strayed into the labyrinth of falling wisteria petals.

Chapter 5: Secretive Angel

“**HOW** do I look, Shindo?” Satsuki’s voice came out slightly more abashed than usual. She glanced over her shoulder to meet Shindo with a bashful expression coloring her features.

“Breathtaking,” Shindo answered. He unfurled the silk shawl in hand as he drew closer to Satsuki and hid the porcelain skin left exposed by the plunging neckline with the flimsy yet dependable piece of thin cloth. “I’m sure the guests will be stunned speechless.”

Satsuki always wore dresses that covered her neck. Even in the summer, her skirts went down to her calves.

Ever since she was a small child, Shindo strictly admonished her, “It would be unseemly for a lady of your stature to unduly expose yourself, Miss.” And thus, Satsuki grew up adhering to a stricter than usual dress code depending on the event she was attending.

But last night, the very man who taught her it was “unseemly” to expose her flesh spent an evening with Satsuki flaunting their nakedness before each other. And thus, the two made love in the greenhouse under the wisteria until dawn.

“It’s a little embarrassing,” Satsuki said as she lightly pulled the shawl that concealed her mostly bare shoulders toward her cleavage.

Shindo slipped behind Satsuki and carefully guided her long hair from under the shawl as he said, “But you truly do look stunning. After all, you are *my* Miss. It’s only natural for you to be beautiful.”

Satsuki’s eighteenth birthday was today. The party would start in the evening. Although there was still plenty of time before the guests would arrive, Satsuki returned to her room after finishing lunch to try on the dress she was supposed to wear.

Shindo chose this dress from a portfolio of party dresses put together by Satsuki’s personal designer. Once she turned twenty, it would become the norm for her to wear evening gowns at parties.

“Maybe I should have gone with a different dress after all,” Shindo remarked as he gently combed Satsuki’s hair over the shawl with his fingers, making her heart skip a beat.

“Oh... So I don’t look good?”

In contrast to the pale dresses she always wore, this was a wine-red dress. While not as revealing as an evening dress, the scoop neckline was more than enough to make Satsuki look like a whole different person. She had never worn a dress that plummeted lower than her collarbone before this.

"No, as I said before, you look wonderful in it. You truly are beautiful," Shindo said, placing his hands on her shoulders and resting his cheek on top of her head. "But...the idea I have to let all those guests see you looking so lovely kills me."

"...Shindo."

"No matter what, please don't remove this shawl. The thought of another man ogling your ivory skin...is more than I can bear," he continued, the sound of his impassioned voice reverberating through her head.

"Were you always this possessive...Shindo?" Satsuki teased lightheartedly. She leaned her head back, resting against Shindo.

"I have been ever since last night," he answered.

She could still summon forth the memory of how Shindo's body felt and the path his hands tread "last night."

"The wisteria...taught me," he continued. His hands slipped from Satsuki's shoulders and slid under her arms. When he folded his hands over her abdomen, Satsuki rested her own hands above his and twisted to look up at him over her shoulder.

"I don't want anyone other than you, either..."

Shindo brought his head down toward her, and the two kissed. In a shower of kisses, Shindo eased in front of Satsuki and wrapped his arms around her anew. He fully relished the sensation of her lips as they moved their heads, shifting the angles of their lips. They kissed so fervently, it almost seemed to indicate that the countless kisses throughout the previous night were nowhere near enough.

"Please wear your hair down..." Shindo whispered.

"Why?" Satsuki asked softly as if in a dream.

"...I'm afraid there is evidence of my devilry." The whisper that slipped from lips only inches away from Satsuki sounded as if it was admonishing those very lips as he confessed in a breathless voice.

Shindo traced his fingers around the edges of Satsuki's left ear, stroking the back of the earlobe time and again as he whispered, "I didn't think I got that rough with you... I'm sorry."

Behind her ear was a slightly red mark reminiscent of a wisteria petal from when Shindo sucked a little too hard. Her skin was so soft and fair, it didn't take much from him to leave a vivid hickey. Aware of the traumatic events Satsuki suffered at school recently, Shindo strived to be as gentle with her as possible, but he couldn't consciously keep himself in check the whole time. Once he was lost in the throes of passion, it was only natural for him to be overtaken by the desire to touch her. He was releasing years' worth of pent up emotions, after all.

"It's fine," Satsuki dismissed with an embarrassed smile and placed her hand over Shindo's fingers to put an end to their toying

with her left ear. "I enjoyed it."

With that, they kissed again. They had to enjoy these moments while they still could.

SATSUKI'S birthday party was held in the banquet hall on the first floor of Tsujikawa mansion. Frequently used for parties and assemblies, it could hold up to 500 guests. Originally about half this size, an expansion was added to double the floorspace before Satsuki was born. Tsubaki said she wanted to hold gatherings for their daughter at the mansion, so Tsukasa humored her.

After presenting her welcoming speech before all the guests, Satsuki was crowded by a throng of business associates and school acquaintances wanting to wish her a happy birthday. The string quartet began playing while her hands were full entertaining the guests.

Meeting her suitors was certainly important, but Satsuki was already run ragged entertaining her guests this evening. Seeing as some of her classmates were also present, she wanted to enjoy some girl's talk with others her own age. Out of fatherly love and care for his birthday girl, Tsukasa set the boundary with her four suitors to "Limit your interactions to only formal introductions today." Not that it stopped Takemi. With everyone distracted by the musicians, Satsuki was brought before her suitors.

All the suitors sought to shake her hand, offer empty compliments with fake smiles, and gloss over their own shortcomings.

It was important to make a good first impression. With roughly ten years between them in age, these men were accustomed to manipulating others. They put on their best smiles and strived to curry her favor.

"Happy birthday, Miss Satsuki."

For a second, Satsuki didn't recognize this man.

"I never dreamed I would have the honor to be invited to your birthday party," he said in an overall polite, sophisticated manner. "Let alone as one of your suitors."

The man bent at the waist as he knelt before Satsuki. With his left hand on his knee and his right hand over his heart, he slightly lowered his head. He managed to get under her skin by intentionally copying Shindo with a pose that represented subservience.

"It is a great honor," the man went on, narrowing his eyes as his handsome face beamed with a smile. Actually, he was eighteen, just like Satsuki. Still young enough to be referred to as a "young man," the aura emanating from Takemi Kaido was far too mature for anyone to think of him as "young."

Takemi had dropped to one knee despite wearing a fine tuxedo.

He made it seem as if that was the natural, proper way to greet her.

Takemi's time spent in America wasn't for nothing. Most Japanese men would make that greeting look painfully awkward if they attempted such a feat. But it didn't seem forced with him. Much like Shindo, it came to him like second nature. He looked like a true gentleman, not giving so much as a hint he was the same person who said and did all those crass things just the other day. He pulled it off with such perfection, it outright unnerved the other three suitors.

To top it off, Takemi broke Tsukasa's instructions to "Limit your interactions to only formal introductions today," and had the nerve to personally invite Satsuki to the terrace. Of course, he first had a brief exchange with Shindo, who was waiting on Satsuki only a short distance off.

"Give us as much space as you possibly can. I'd be too afraid to chat with Miss Satsuki with her wannabe-bodyguard breathing down my neck," he jeered. Needless to say, he was hardly the type of man to let Shindo's presence bother him.

"MR. Shindo!"

Shindo was staring intently through the half-open French doors leading to the terrace. He tilted his head in the direction of the voice that called his name.

"Where is Satsuki? I don't see her anywhere," Alice said as she rushed toward him, slightly holding up the hem of her long, rich emerald green dress to avoid tripping.

"She is out on the terrace. I'm afraid she's in the middle of a conversation at the moment," he answered.

Alice followed Shindo's gaze to find Satsuki and Takemi discussing something on the terrace.

"I'm sure this must be difficult for you, Miss Misakimori. It weighed heavily on the Miss's heart when she learned of it," Shindo informed Alice.

She figured he was probably referring to how Takemi was originally supposed to be her fiancé. She simply shrugged her shoulders in resignation and replied, "My father informed me last night, but it doesn't bother me any if Satsuki picks Kaido."

The two stood against the terrace rail as they talked. Going by the view of their backs, they seemed so comfortable together, it was as if they were made for each other.

"When my father made a proposal for a massive loan from a bank affiliated with Kaido Financial Group, he basically threw my betrothal in as an afterthought... To top it off, I've only ever met Kaido a few times," Alice explained with a giggle as she turned to look back at Shindo. But that giggle gradually grew uncertain, and her brows

dropped in sorrow.

As Shindo watched the couple out on the terrace, his expression was undeniably different from when he usually watched protectively over Satsuki. He looked uneasy...and somewhat angry. It was as if the love of his life was just snatched from him.

“**NONE** too happy, eh?” Takemi asked with a dry chuckle to which Satsuki tilted her head quizzically.

“I wouldn’t say that... I’m not particularly angry with you,” she replied.

Takemi stopped staring off into the sky to turn toward Satsuki. With a snort, he laughed, “I didn’t mean you!”

“Then who?” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, it hit her. Takemi returned his attention to the sky; Satsuki followed his gaze.

“The wind is pissed... It says not to get near you,” he answered.

Satsuki noticed as much herself. The wind and trees that always embraced her were openly hostile toward Takemi.

“You can tell what they’re saying as well?”

“Not as well as you can. The emotions of everything not human are a confusing, jumbled mess. But...I can recognize when they’re being overly aggressive. It’s obvious when something doesn’t like me. Kinda like a mutt growling at ya when you get too close.”

Whoosh... Rustle... The passing breeze shook the trees to warn her “That man is dangerous. Get away from him... Get away...quickly... Don’t go near him... Otherwise your memories will resurface.” The energy of the trees entered Satsuki’s body, making her grimace. The other day, Takemi proclaimed that they met before. He also went so far as to claim Satsuki saved his life. Yet she had no memory of any of this. And she shouldn’t. Supposedly Takemi sealed those memories away. Satsuki wanted to ask him about it.

“**THE** wind and air here is always on your side, isn’t it...?” Takemi mused as he slowly moved his head to look to his left and right. He rolled his shoulders as if finding the hostile air uncomfortable.

“The wind has been my constant playmate since I was little. What would you expect? If it’s hostile enough to make you uncomfortable, doesn’t that mean you harbor awfully wicked thoughts about me?”

Satsuki meant that as more of a joke than anything, but Takemi casually replied, “Pretty much. If that attendant wasn’t staring daggers at me on the other side of the glass door, I’d take you to the bushes and have my way with you.”

“...Oh, not more of that nonsense...”

“It isn’t nonsense,” Takemi corrected her. Although they had been standing shoulder to shoulder, Takemi turned around to sit on the rail. Resting both elbows on it, he leaned to one side as he peered into Satsuki’s eyes. “I said I’d tell you about how we met between the sheets, remember?”

While it was true he said as much, Satsuki wrote it off as nothing more than a tasteless joke. She recalled how he brushed his lips against hers in a kiss two days ago, making her cheeks turn red. In an attempt to keep from blushing, she bit her bottom lip hard. She had forgotten how Takemi’s lips felt with all of Shindo’s kisses and didn’t want that memory to resurface.

“What’s this...? You...” Takemi’s sleek grin was suddenly replaced with surprise. Grabbing Satsuki’s chin, he gazed deeply into her eyes. “You...and that attendant...” As realization struck, Satsuki grabbed his hand and broke her head free of his grasp.

Takemi had read Satsuki’s mind expecting to find the afterimage of the kiss he gave Satsuki the day before yesterday. But the thoughts he encountered were not filled with the memory of his lips pressed against hers. And to top it off...

“Wow... He actually banged you pretty good...”

“Don’t use such crass language,” Satsuki reprimanded as she glared angrily at Takemi, but he merely snorted.

“So what? Would you prefer if I said that attendant took your maidenhood? Don’t be stupid! No matter how nice and pretty you make it sound, he still popped your cherry. It doesn’t change the fact you lost your virginity.”

“What would you know...?”

Satsuki and Shindo’s emotions finally interlinked. Even though they knew they shouldn’t, they finally connected in mind and body...after tormenting themselves in an attempt to resist the irrepressible pull. Hearing Takemi befoul their beautiful love with such crass language was nothing short of disgusting.

“If you don’t want a woman who has known the touch of another man, step down as a suitor right this instant,” Satsuki hissed as she shied away from Takemi.

Rather than show disgust at this revelation, Takemi stepped forward as if truly happy. He began to twirl the knot holding the lace shawl on her shoulders between his fingers as he replied, “I don’t have a problem with that! Why, this is all the better! Truth be told, virgins can be a pain in the ass. I actually wouldn’t mind if you racked up some more experience. All the more enjoyable for me on our honeymoon.”

Although the knot was tight enough it should have been impossible for him to untie with only one finger, the shawl slid

unbound from her body before Satsuki had a chance to catch it.

The plummeting dress revealed more of Satsuki's neckline than was usually permitted. Takemi ran his right hand along the white flesh peeking out of the red dress from her shoulders to her ear.

"...What are you—?!" Satsuki hissed as she tried to pull away, but Takemi snatched a tuft of hair by her left ear.

Before he could do anything with the handful of hair, Satsuki's knight in shining armor intervened. "As I said yesterday, please refrain from stepping out of line, Mr. Kaido." Shindo firmly held Takemi's wrist, meeting the irritated gaze the boy shot up at him levelly.

He had been waiting on the other side of the French doors, but came when he perceived Satsuki was in distress. He squeezed the hand drawn from Satsuki's hair with such force, Takemi couldn't help but wince.

"How do you get off telling me not to 'step out of line,' attendant?" Takemi sneered with a baleful glare and jerked his hand free of the retainer's grasp. "You certainly 'stepped out of line' with Satsuki. What's the world coming to when the attendant meant to protect his charge plucks her rose instead?!"

"Mr. Kaido!" Satsuki interjected, trying to put a stop to Takemi's tirade.

They were the only ones out on the terrace at the moment, but all it took was someone to notice they were out there and ask, "What are they up to?" They would become the center of scandalous attention in a matter of seconds.

"Should I go announce it to everyone? Let 'em know how this here attendant ate Miss Satsuki from head to toe?" Takemi leaned forward, craning his head to look menacingly at Shindo as he threatened the retainer. If he spread a rumor like that, it would become the main event of the evening.

It wasn't as though Takemi was truly angry Shindo bedded Satsuki. The only reason he was threatening to tell everyone was because he wanted to see the man beg, "Please don't!" The retainer was always at Satsuki's side and that didn't sit well with the young suitor.

He didn't have anything against Shindo personally, but he wanted to secure a sense of superiority by seeing the retainer grovel before him. That was the extent of what motivated his actions.

"Please don't, Mr. Kaido," Shindo said as he slightly lowered his head. For a second, Takemi thought things were proceeding exactly as he planned, but what Shindo proceeded to say betrayed his expectations.

"It would tarnish your reputation if you spread such unsavory rumors. If anything were to happen at the moment to make you come

across unrefined in the eyes of the masses, it would prove detrimental in the event the Miss officially chose you to be her fiancé."

Shindo slowly raised his hand and looked Takemi square in the eye as he asked, "Are you certain that's what you want?"

It was certainly less than desirable for Satsuki's relationship with Shindo to get brought out into the open. However, it was exceedingly disadvantageous for Takemi to develop a reputation of dubious character by spreading rumors without solid evidence to back it up.

Satsuki's suitors were required to be refined gentlemen of intellect at all times. The man who would someday lead the Tsujikawa family and business alongside her must never carry any traits that could earn the derision of others.

"Fine," Takemi grumbled. Shoving his hands into his suit jacket, he gave an exasperated sigh. "I'm not about to screw myself over." Knocking Shindo's chest with the back of his fist, he added with a grin, "That was a pretty smooth move. You're a quick thinker."

"Thank you," Shindo replied, openly accepting the compliment.

Takemi went one step further, delivering the coup de grace, "I'm sure you'll make a great secretary for Satsuki someday. 'Course, I'll expect you to work just as hard for me, Shindo my boy!"

Satsuki stepped forward to chastise him, but the hand Shindo placed on her shoulder stilled her tongue. Throwing the two a nasty look, Takemi lightly waved as he turned to leave.

"Later, Satsuki. I'll be back to see you again. I can't have the others show me up. I'll tell you everything you want to know some other time...if I'm in the mood," he alluded with his back turned toward her. Not bothering to look back, he returned to the banquet hall.

LEFT alone with Satsuki on the terrace, Shindo snatched the shawl from the ground once Takemi was out of sight. He quietly began to straighten the tufts of disheveled hair hanging over her shoulders.

"I will go fetch another shawl for you since this one was on the ground," he offered.

"But it isn't really dirty."

"Nevertheless, I will get another," Shindo insisted, ignoring Satsuki's protest. He personally tied the knot on Satsuki's shawl nice and tight, but Takemi unbound it. He didn't want the sullied cloth to touch her skin ever again.

Placing a hand softly on Shindo's arm, Satsuki looked up at him with pained eyes. "I'm sorry you had to go through that... He read my mind...and learned about us..."

Much like Satsuki, Takemi could read people's minds. She should be able to shield her mind in the same manner he did, but she lacked

that ability. While she had read minds throughout the years, she never had to cope with someone reading her mind before. Which was hardly surprising considering she never met another soul with psychic powers. She lacked the means to protect herself from others with powers.

On the flip side, Satsuki couldn't help but wonder what sort of life Takemi led up until now for him to know how to seal her memories and shield his own mind. Although she was extremely curious, the only way she'd ever find out was by asking the man in question. She couldn't read his mind since he absolutely never let his thoughts wander unguarded. If she wanted answers, she had to figure out how to get it out of him in a way other than between the sheets.

"I had a wonderful time, but aren't you exhausted, Satsuki?" Miharuru said as the party was drawing to a close. She was wearing a shimmering, black pearl evening dress. Boasting an amazing figure to begin with, the formal gown only served to accentuate her beauty, making her positively radiant. As a matter of fact, she was the center of attention among the businessmen throughout the course of the party. If it weren't for that "baggage" standing next to her, Miharuru would have been drowned in a sea of men in their twenties and thirties.

"No, I had great fun. I'm not tired at all," Satsuki replied with a smile before Miharuru and that "baggage" at her side, Manabu. They were in the banquet hall, mostly empty now that nearly all of the guests were gone.

"Be sure to get plenty of rest tonight, okay?" Miharuru told Satsuki before turning to Shindo. "Make sure to tuck her in for me. Don't let her stay up all night, you hear me?"

Miharuru made it sound like Satsuki was still a little kid! She was hoping Satsuki would indignantly cry, "Miharuru!" and give her one of those adorable dirty looks. But things didn't go as she hoped.

Satsuki dropped her eyes down to the ground shyly before quickly looking up at Shindo. Noticing her eyes on him, Shindo offered Satsuki a smile. Somehow just watching them made Miharuru embarrassed.

Perhaps Satsuki perceived the confusion in Miharuru's heart. She kept the door to her heart closed the whole evening to avoid losing herself in the tumult of thoughts from all the guests. Nevertheless, when she was mentally or emotionally fatigued, her powers would show her glimmers of what people were thinking whether she wanted them to or not.

Peeling her eyes from Shindo, Satsuki turned to face Manabu. "Thank you for coming, Manabu."

“You’re welcome. You look wonderful in that dress, Satsuki. Shindo has great taste,” he replied despite how grossly inappropriate it sounded coming from the man trying to tear her from Shindo.

“Thank you. It’s a shame we weren’t able to meet this fifth suitor you’re recommending,” Shindo said, bringing up the fifth marriage candidate whose documents still weren’t in order.

Never expecting to hear that from Shindo, Manabu’s eyes grew wide in surprise. But he quickly recovered and barked a chuckle as he said, “You’ll meet him soon enough.”

THEY didn’t return to Satsuki’s room until after 11:00. The only thing Satsuki had to do was shower off a day’s worth of fatigue in the ensuite bathroom, change into her nightgown, and go to sleep. That was it. But she was still in her party dress as she fervently kissed Shindo in his arms, preventing her from doing any of the things she needed to do. Not that she intended to do any of them.

As if to prove the point, the embracing couple refused to tear their lips from one another. Shindo began to slide the dress off Satsuki’s shoulders.

With a weak, meager plop, the beautiful material that had concealed Satsuki’s body until now turned into just a pile of cloth at her feet. Tonight Shindo slid onto the sheets with Satsuki’s arms wrapped around the back of his neck.

“...I love you...Shindo... I...love...you...” Satsuki repeated those taboo words as they embraced.

“Miss... I love you too.”

Once again, the two broke the forbidden taboo. They savored every moment of the month allotted them.

“WOW! I’m impressed, Miss Satsuki!” exclaimed a smirking man behind a pair of glasses. The man slowly clapped from his seat in the drawing room. “That was wonderful! I’m impressed you’re so talented with both the violin and the piano.” Although the tone of his voice was mild and calm, Satsuki could sense thorns hidden in his compliments.

This was Takaaki Kujo, the owner of the Kujo Trading Company’s second son. He was currently thirty-three. He was the oldest of Satsuki’s suitors. Frequently making deals with foreign companies for his business turned him into a highly skilled conversationalist. He was the sort of man who could effortlessly come up with an empty compliment or two on the spot.

That didn’t mean he was being insincere when he praised Satsuki’s skill with the piano. Her proficiency with the piano and

violin were masterful.

Proficiency with the piano is a key skill for proper young ladies... Anyone stuck playing from the time they're a kid should only improve in skill. In contrast to his kind eyes, he viewed the world with a rather hardened heart.

Roughly a week had passed since Satsuki's birthday party. Perhaps because Tsukasa told them to save discussions for another day, the four suitors began rolling in to Tsujikawa mansion one after the next the following day. A different suitor called on her practically every day all week. It was honestly a hassle dealing with them all the time. However, experience allowed Satsuki to keep her impressions to herself, no matter what leaked from her suitor's unshielded thoughts.

This was Takaaki Kujo's second visit. The last time he came, he mentioned how he enjoyed listening to classical music. That conversation ultimately ended with him asking Satsuki to play the piano for him the next time he came by. So the grand piano was relocated to the drawing room before he arrived at 7:00 in the evening.

It was only natural for the suitors to have the courtesy to give advance notice when they were going to pay a visit. They were the ones trying to curry her favor. If they suddenly showed up when Satsuki was tired, it could make her view them in a bad light. That was the normal way of viewing things.

There was one inconsiderate jerk who would suddenly show up unannounced. If that weren't bad enough, he came every day at the exact same time as the other suitors. It was almost as if he knew what time they were scheduled to arrive. Actually, it was quite possible he did.

"Any proper young lady is made to play the piano from the time she's little. You'd think it's a key item for them! It's only natural she's good at it."

These words made Kujo's stomach lurch. He was thinking the exact same thing only a moment ago.

The man who casually threw that rather insulting comment at Satsuki walked up to her with a grin. "Isn't that right, Miss Satsuki?" Takemi asked with a smile and lightly slapped her on the back. His demeanor felt so contrived, she wanted to flash him a dirty look, but couldn't with Kujo present.

Who the heck does this annoying brat think he is? I don't care if he's fresh back from the States! Does he seriously think he's on the same level as the rest of us? He's still wet behind the ears without any real world experience.

Kujo's disgruntled thoughts invariably flowed into Takemi's mind as well. Unlike Takemi, the other suitors were already invaluable

assets to their family's business or trade. All three were a good decade older than Satsuki too.

On the other hand, Takemi was still only eighteen. Though there was talk in the business world that "Kaido's fourth son has a good head on his shoulders," being placed on the same pedestal as a "boy" this young didn't sit well with Kujo. The same was most likely true of the other suitors as well.

"Satsuki, let's play piano four hands," Takemi suddenly proposed, surprising Satsuki. He mentioned the form of duet casually enough, but did he actually know how to play the piano?

Ignoring Satsuki's concern and Kujo's incredulous stare over the sudden proposition, Takemi scooted the piano bench slightly to the right before moving to stand to the left. If Satsuki was on the right, that meant she would be the Primo. With Takemi on the left, he would be the Secondo.

Takemi indicated himself with a flourish of his left hand to his face as he said, "I'll handle the sustaining pedal."

The sustaining pedal was located at the center-right of the piano. However, it was common practice for the Secondo on the left to manage the pedaling. At least he possessed a certain degree of knowledge to know that.

Playing the piano four hands referred to a type of piano duet performed on one piano with two players. Satsuki had only done it a handful of times herself. When she was a little girl, she did it with the pianist giving her piano lessons.

He's bitten off more than he can chew! There is no way he'll pull off playing four hands with Miss Satsuki. He's only going to humiliate himself, Kujo thought.

Ignoring Kujo's twisted expectations, Takemi raised his head with a somewhat contemplative expression. "What should we play...? The score needs to be written for this... How about Mozart...? No..."

A lightbulb seemed to turn on as he flashed a quick look at Shindo standing by the drawing room windowsill. "Let's go with Brahms," he declared.

Satsuki's hand flinched involuntarily at the mention of Brahms. He was Shindo's favorite composer. Knowing Shindo was clearly a fan of the Romantic period, Takemi intentionally picked Brahms. There was nothing but malice behind his choice.

"Brahm's 'Hungarian Dance No. 5 in G Minor', to be precise," Takemi continued. The moment he finished speaking, his fingers hit the keys. Watching him closely in anticipation, Satsuki struck the keys at the exact same time.

What the...? That snot-nosed brat can actually play? Satsuki was just as surprised as the thoughts that popped into Kujo's head.

Takemi struck the keys with true mastery. Their duet was in perfect sync as they beautifully played the song all the way through.

“Bravo! That was fantastic, Mr. Kaido!”

The duet performed by Satsuki and Takemi was superb. Naturally, even Shindo offered silent applause. Yet as he clapped his hands, his locked on Satsuki next to Takemi with unconcealed uncertainty as horrified disbelief welled within.

Satsuki was shocked. Of course she was surprised to learn Takemi possessed the technical skill to play the duet, but also that he could play that song so smoothly with her. It was as if they always played this together. They were in perfect harmony.

It wasn't as if Satsuki consciously tried to match Takemi. It was an upbeat song. She had every intention to leave him behind if he missed a note or couldn't keep up. But Takemi didn't show a speck of hesitation.

“How was it, Mr. Shindo?” Takemi asked. He threw Shindo a triumphant grin. “What did you think of my duet with Satsuki...? Hard to believe that was our first time, wasn't it?”

Dropping his head, Shindo offered the simple compliment, “It was wonderful.”

Although there was no fun to be had in Shindo's rather brusque response, Kujo's surprise and panic proved more amusing. Even if Takemi was younger, he was still an imposing threat after seeing how well the two harmonized during their first piano session together.

Takemi left the piano to slowly approached Shindo. “Aren't you going to play, Mr. Shindo? Seeing as you've been with Miss Satsuki all these years, I'm sure you two would put on a great show,” he jeered.

“No, I don't play the—”

“Oh, you don't? Sorry, my bad!” Before Shindo could finish his answer, Takemi cut him off and slapped his forehead as if to say, “It slipped my mind!”

He rested an elbow on Shindo's shoulder and whispered in the retainer's ear, “Instead of the piano, you play Satsuki...don't you?”

This was whispered for Shindo's ears only. Kujo had no way of overhearing what was said. Able to discern the contents carried in his voice, Satsuki jumped from her seat.

Huh? What's gotten into Miss Satsuki? Kujo wondered in open bewilderment at the sight of the young lady bursting from her bench to glare angrily in the direction of Shindo and Takemi.

Satsuki wanted to insist that Takemi apologize to Shindo, but he said it in such a hushed voice, most girls wouldn't have been able to hear it across the room. Kujo would probably find it strange if she got upset. So instead, Satsuki suddenly changed the subject. “Shindo is in charge of tuning both my piano and my violin. He is my personal,

expert tuner,” she declared in Shindo’s defense.

So what? Are you implying he tunes your body, too? A voice suddenly echoed in her head. It wasn’t one of Kujo’s thoughts slipping into her mind.

Takemi was speaking to Satsuki directly through her mind. She swiftly brought one hand to her head. No one had ever spoken with her telepathically before.

What’s wrong, Satsuki? Why so surprised? The incoming thoughts berated her mercilessly. Haven’t you done the exact same thing? Back when you were an infant unable to speak. Remember how you spoke with your parents and Shindo this way?

Even though he should have no way of knowing her distant past, Takemi spoke of it with casual familiarity. And it was all true. From the time she was a fetus in her mother’s womb, she telepathically communicated with her parents.

Haven’t you used this ability to confuse the mind and kill a man? Isn’t that how you killed him?

The sudden revelation made Satsuki gulp. *What does he mean...? I killed someone that way...? What is he talking about?* She had no recollection of the incident, but she knew what it might imply. This was most likely related to the memories that Takemi sealed away.

Did...I kill someone else...? Who...in the world...was it? she asked herself, the blood gradually draining from her face.

Seeing her grow pale, Shindo silently brushed Takemi’s arm off his shoulder and went to Satsuki’s side. “Miss?”

Satsuki’s heart reached out to him for comfort once he stood at her side. “Shin...do...” she whispered.

Putting himself between Takemi and Satsuki, Shindo wrapped his arm around her shoulders. Cold sweat was running down her tormented visage. Shindo turned to face Kujo and lowered his head slightly as he said, “I’m terribly sorry, Mr. Kujo. It would appear the Miss isn’t feeling well. Would you be so kind as to take your leave for the day?”

“S-Sure... Is Miss Satsuki okay?” he asked.

“I suspect she’s feeling a bit anemic. I’m sorry for putting you out like this.”

“No, it’s fine... Miss Satsuki, try to take it easy,” Kujo said. If the retainer who served Satsuki said she was feeling anemic, Kujo had no cause to question the man. He rose from his chair to leave.

Takemi broke his gaze from the couple to shoot a quick look over at Kujo.

I didn’t take him seriously before, but that Kaido brat could prove problematic. I get the feeling he won’t go down easy, Kujo thought.

Takemi frowned over the thoughts of how the man plotted to get

in his way, but a moment later, he turned that frown upside down.

“**PLEASE** go rest. I will be up to check on you as soon as I finish tuning the piano,” Shindo repeated yet again as he wiped the music tray with the microfiber cloth reserved specifically for the piano.

Kujo and Takemi had already left the mansion. After seeing them off, Shindo escorted Satsuki to her room and helped ease her into the sofa to rest for a while. Held close to his chest, she seemed to calm down enough after half an hour that he felt comfortable leaving to tune the piano in the music room.

The grand piano in the drawing room was originally kept in the music room. It was Shindo’s duty to maintain the upkeep of everything Satsuki used. So the responsibility of keeping her piano beautifully tuned naturally fell on him.

But before five minutes went by, Satsuki slipped into the music room. Although not as pale as before, Shindo was still worried about her. He instructed the young lady to return to her room three times, but Satsuki refused to obey.

“No! I’ll wait for you to finish here. I want to stay with you, Shindo,” Satsuki insisted and sullenly turned her head away from him. If she felt good enough to throw a little tantrum, she must be feeling better.

With a light sigh, Shindo hung the microfiber cloth over the sidearm. He wiped the palms of his hands with a handkerchief as he approached Satsuki. Gently placing one hand on her cheek, he turned her head to face him.

“I just finished,” he reported, looking down at Satsuki lovingly.

Responding to his affection, she gazed up at him. “Shindo...” the sullen voice begging for attention that slipped from Satsuki’s lips was cut off as his lips sealed her mouth.

Their lips parted with a loud smack.

“I...was rather frustrated today,” Shindo confessed upon pulling away from Satsuki’s lips.

With her face flushed, Satsuki tilted her head to one side as if puzzled.

“When you played the piano with Mr. Kaido,” he went on.

Grabbing Satsuki by the waist, he effortlessly lifted her up and carried her to the piano. He sat her atop the music tray toward the upper register. Without thinking, Satsuki drew her feet together and held them up. The fallboard was left up, so she was afraid her shoes would get the keys dirty.



“It was terribly frustrating...how perfectly in sync you two were...” Shindo continued as he slipped off her shoes. Holding both ankles in his hands, he slowly lowered them onto the keyboard.

Clang... Ting... At the sound of two beautiful clangs, Shindo began massaging her feet from her ankles down to the tip of her toes.

“I’m the only one who is supposed to be on the same wavelength as you...” he complained. Lifting Satsuki’s right foot with both hands, he kissed the tip of her toes.

“...That tickles...!”

Satsuki became an exquisite instrument for Shindo, her melodious cries reminiscent of breathtaking music. Yet behind the scenes of this joyful recital, something began to make its move.

“**THE** hell?! What is going on?!” Kujo couldn’t help but cry out. “Why isn’t it working?! Come on!”

Kujo frantically hit the steering wheel of the car he was driving. The malfunction hit without warning. All of a sudden, the steering wheel refused to turn! Kujo desperately pounded it time and again! Each time, he shouted, “Move! Move, damn it!”

Seeing as the car was speeding along, his fear was perfectly warranted. If he couldn’t turn the steering wheel, how could he go around any corners? To make matters worse, the quiet road near Tsujikawa mansion was about to merge onto a busy thoroughfare. If he couldn’t get the steering wheel to unlock by then, the car would crash in the T-intersection!

No matter how hard he hit the brakes, the Speedometer stayed fixed where it was. Kujo felt as if he were trapped in a horrible nightmare. He could see the thoroughfare drawing near. The heavy traffic of speeding cars entered the edge of his vision, but his vehicle refused to slow down one bit.

“Graaaah...!”

WITH a derisive grin, Takemi opened his eyes. He drove a short distance after leaving Tsujikawa mansion before pulling over. Leaning against the hood of his car, he watched something take place with his eyes closed.

“...That’s one down...” Takemi said with an impish grin. Looking up at the night sky, he declared, “...It’s finally started...Satsuki. About damn time!”

“**ARE** you tired?” Shindo asked out of concern as Satsuki sank onto her sofa.

“...I’m fine,” she replied. Despite what she said, she was unable to hide the fatigue hanging over her. “It’d be disrespectful to the

deceased to say otherwise given the circumstances.”

Satsuki tried to smile for him, but it came out looking pained. Shutting the door to her room, Shindo gave her a worried look.

Three days ago, Takaaki Kujo lost his life in a car wreck. There was no indication he tried to hit the brakes as his car raced into a T-intersection. A semitrailer truck crashed into him, totaling the car and killing Kujo on the spot.

It was unknown whether he took his eyes off the road or was lost in thought. Seeing as he sped into the intersection without breaking, it was initially deemed suicide.

Due to scheduling conflicts, Kujo's wake was held a bit later than was customary. Satsuki just returned from making her appearance. The sudden death of one of her suitors was a great shock to her heart. Although she wasn't emotionally invested in him, she had nonetheless interacted with Kujo. Moreover, he got in the fatal accident immediately after seeing her.

With downcast eyes, Satsuki stared at her hands cupped over her knees. Shindo knelt and scooped up her hands. “I realize it's inappropriate to tell you to ‘cheer up’ given the situation, but try not to let it bother you... It isn't as though you've done anything wrong,” he comforted.

“I know...” Satsuki realized he was right, but she couldn't help but feel strangely guilty.

Her other suitors also came to burn incense at the wake. It wasn't as if she was there the whole night, but from what she saw, the others left immediately after burning their offering of incense as if they also felt awkward. There was only one exception.

Takemi was the only one to arrive at nearly the exact same time as Satsuki and remain at the wake until she left. While she offered her condolences to Kujo's father and business associates, she could feel Takemi's eyes fixed on her. Yet he never walked up to strike a conversation. Not only did he refrain from speaking to her openly...he also kept from speaking to her telepathically.

“Hey, Shindo? There's something I want you to tell me,” Satsuki said. She peered at Shindo with haunted eyes, squeezing the hands he held over her lap. “...Back when I was four...didn't I kill...the man who raised you like his own from the time you were little?”

Shindo's eyes widened. That memory was nothing but pain to Satsuki. It was the very memory he had urged her to *forget*. But no matter how desperately Shindo told her, “Please forget,” it was impossible for Satsuki to drive that memory from her mind in its entirety.

“Didn't I ask you to forget about that...?” Shindo asked with a grim smile as he stroked Satsuki's hair. “That was when I ‘stepped out

of line' with you."

At the time, Shindo asked Satsuki to forget the fact they kissed along with her resurfaced memories.

"...Even though that is nothing...compared to what we're doing now?" Satsuki asked in a whisper, spots of red painting her cheeks.

Shindo stretched up to lightly kiss her before answering, "Fair enough."

The sight of his gentle smile filled Satsuki with joy, but she forced herself to ask the most imperative question. "Aside from that...and the incident at school...have I taken anyone else's life?"

"What would make you ask such a thing? Of course you haven't. Such a thing has never happened," Shindo denied, caught off guard. A moment later, he regained his composure and asked, "Why *do* you ask?"

"...He said I did... He claimed...I murdered someone by playing tricks on his mind..." Satsuki confessed, tearing her eyes away from Shindo. How could she hope to look the man she loved in the eye as she spoke of the possibility of killing a man?

"Takemi Kaido knows something about me... He said that he sealed memories of when I was young, but I don't know. I can't say for sure... No matter how hard I try to remember, nothing comes back to me. I've met him before—back when I was a little girl—but I can't even remember that."

The first time she met Takemi, Satsuki recognized his cold, piercing eyes. She felt as though she had seen them before. Perhaps those eyes were the only thing she remembered from a fragment of her sealed memories.

"And he isn't willing to tell you?" Shindo asked.

"...He would between the sheets...or so he said." Satsuki smiled dryly as she mentioned the condition Takemi presented as a joke; Shindo suddenly pulled her into an embrace.

"...Then why do you need to remember?"

"Shindo..."

"There is no need for you to remember. Even if you did kill someone, those memories will bring you nothing but pain. Don't worry about remembering that. Even if you have met Mr. Kaido in the past, that has no bearing on the present." Shindo held her even tighter as he revealed his true feelings, "I don't want...another man to touch you..."

Satsuki's chest grew painfully tight as she wrapped her arms around Shindo and held tightly onto his back. "...I'm sorry for bringing up such an unpleasant topic."

Nonetheless, these were things she had to remember. She had to learn the truth. Satsuki could feel it in her very soul.

"I honestly think we got lucky with Mr. Kujo's demise," a man said. Although he was being inappropriate, the man asserted himself with a smile as he merrily talked with his hands. "With him out of the picture, there is one less rival to worry about. Of course, it's awful he got in that terrible accident, but I personally view it as an opportunity more than anything." Forming fists with both hands, his words were empowered with boundless confidence.

Resting his arms on the large chair's armrests, he turned diagonally to face Takemi for affirmation. "How about it? Aren't you of a similar mind, Mr. Kaido?"

Takemi gave an amused sigh and took a sip of his coffee before sizing up the man with a bemused gleam in his eyes. "Mr. Hakamada, you certainly aren't afraid to speak your mind."

"Ha ha! Is that a fact?" The man who responded with a triumphant grin was the twenty-nine-year-old Shinichiro Hakamada.

He was the grandson of Dietman Hakamada, a veteran in the political world with experience as a Prime Minister. At present, he was serving as the first secretary for his father, who was also a politician. It was already *fixed* so that he would become a third-generation Dietman in the upcoming year's election. Due to his upbringing and promised future, he was bursting with self-confidence. This confidence gave him drive. With a strong competitive streak, he was an exceedingly shrewd man. Not to mention he was also one of Satsuki's suitors.

"But if you put it that bluntly, well, see the dirty look the young lady is giving you?" Takemi made his hands into a steeple as he indicated the other man should direct his attention to the sofa. Satsuki was sitting upon it with a somewhat perturbed grimace.

"For the record, I agree with your opinion that one rival is out of the picture. But wouldn't it be wise to avoid saying things that could get misconstrued as 'I'm glad he died' before a young lady so angelic she couldn't even kill a fly?" Takemi pointed out.

Satsuki's frown only darkened. She could sense unpleasant undertones in his "couldn't even kill a fly," which grated on her.

"Really? Jeez, I'm sorry, Miss Satsuki," he apologized. *Is she too soft to handle cutthroat business talk? But I've heard Miss Satsuki is a clever woman ready to take over Tsujikawa Corporation in a heartbeat.*

Hakamada offered the apology readily enough, but Satsuki effortlessly undermined it with her smile. "Oh, think nothing of it. You won't make it big in the business world if you can't make plans to topple a rival behind a smile. Isn't it the same in the political world?"

"I can tell you're the Tsujikawa heiress! You really do get it! Mr. Kaido, it looks like you were worried for nothing!" Hakamada

exclaimed. *This woman isn't just some overprotected princess after all! Behind that pretty face, she's as vicious as any viper!* Although he didn't mean it maliciously, Satsuki's eyebrow twitched over how inappropriate it came across.

All Monday morning, the drawing room in Tsujikawa mansion was occupied with Hakamada, who came to "curry favor with Miss Satsuki," and Takemi, whose coinciding visit seemed concerted.

There were only two weeks left for the suitors. The loss of one rival truly was a golden opportunity for the survivors. Despite work scheduled that morning, Hakamada went so far as to take time off to come pay Satsuki a visit.

"Miss Satsuki, you sure are vicious! You're not just some pretty face! Dang, you're scary!" Takemi said to Satsuki with a chuckle. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Hakamada jump.

Of course the man jumped! Takemi just said almost exactly what he was thinking. Hakamada was so rattled, he failed to get a good grasp on the coffee cup and knocked it over.

"Youch...!" Hakamada quickly pulled his hand away as he jumped up, but in his haste, his hand knocked over the saucer. The spilled coffee fanned out and splattered on him. Since he was standing, the coffee consequentially sprayed onto his pants, albeit only lightly.

"Are you okay, Mr. Hakamada? Did you get burned...?" Shindo asked.

Satsuki hastily rose from her seat, but when she saw Shindo rush over from his place by the window with a cloth in hand, she sat back down.

"Honestly, this is more embarrassing than anything," he said with an embarrassed laugh as he hid his face behind one hand.

"Was it hot? Fortunately, it doesn't look like much got on you. I'll help you clean it off if you will follow me to another room..." Shindo offered as he swiftly placed the cup upright and wiped up the spilt coffee. He moved with such speed, Hakamada had to look twice. "Your pants appear to have gotten dirty, so if you would follow me," Shindo repeated.

"Oh, right..." If it was his jacket, he could have taken it off and given it to Shindo, but that wasn't exactly an option with his pants.

With the sullied cloth and cup in one hand, Shindo turned to Satsuki and said, "I will escort Mr. Hakamada to the powder room. Another attendant will be here to replace me shortly."

Once Shindo left to escort Hakamada, Satsuki would be alone in the drawing room with Takemi. It was customary for an attendant to wait on hand to ensure "the Miss never suffered for want." However, Takemi voiced his grievance with Shindo's statement. "Now hold on!

You make it sound like you're sending someone in because you're afraid I might do something!"

"We are under strict orders from the master never to leave the Miss unattended," Shindo replied to Takemi's objection with a bow before motioning Hakamada toward the door.

Watching how Shindo managed the whole situation, the future politician exclaimed, "Wow, that was impressive! I'm amazed how quick you move. I see Miss Satsuki's personal retainer truly is one of a kind."

But there are some unsavory rumors about you two. There isn't any funny business going on, is there? Even if there is, I'll send you packing with a wad of cash soon enough. His vicious thoughts that went down a slightly different vector than questioning her relationship with Shindo made Satsuki furrow her brow.

"That politician boy sure is nasty! The easy answer to any problem is always money!" Takemi said with a heavy sigh as he sunk into his chair after Shindo led Hakamada out of the room. He was able to read the man's mind just like Satsuki.

"If acting like a civil being is so exhausting, why don't you give it a rest?"

In front of the other suitors, Takemi played the role of the "Kaido's prim and proper fourth son." In response to Satsuki's snarky comment about his charade, Takemi softly chuckled as he rose to join her on the sofa. "We couldn't have that, now could we? You wouldn't want people laughing about how the Tsujikawa princess picked a man the polar opposite from the attendant providing sex ed, would you? I'm only pretending to be a proper gentleman for your sake."

"And you seriously think...I'll choose you?" she retorted. Caught in the heat of the moment, she glared at Takemi. But the moment she did, he grabbed her by the shoulders and slammed her against the seat of the couch!

"You can't choose anyone else," he snarled.

"D-Don't be stupid! Let go of me!" Satsuki commanded. She tried to lash out in an attempt to break free of Takemi's grasp, but he was so strong, she couldn't even raise her arms. "Let...go...!"

Glaring at her defiantly as he held her pinned down by the shoulders, Takemi's lips curled into a devilish smile. Hoping to knock him off, Satsuki blasted concentrated will through her hateful glare.

Bang! With the loud crack of something like fireworks going off, a flash ran through Satsuki's mind. Momentarily blinded by the white flash, her head swam so wildly she nearly blacked out.

"...That's a waste of energy," Takemi said with a frigid smile before Satsuki as her eyes fluttered in a desperate attempt to remain open. Her face twisted, assaulted by the sudden shock. "Your powers

won't work on me."

Satsuki had tried to use her powers to knock him off. Alas, Takemi effortlessly blocked the attack and countered with what felt like a jolt of electricity through her mind.

"You've led such a coddled life, there's no way your wussy powers could hurt me..." Takemi said as he untied her blouse's ribbon.

Horried, Satsuki grabbed his hands and shouted, "Stop it! Can't you see how insulting this is?"

But he deftly broke free from her grasp. Clamping both wrists in one hand, he held them out of the way over her head. "So it's fine when your attendant does it, but insulting when your fiancé does? Shouldn't that be the other way around?" he chastised.

"S-Since when were you my fiancé? Stop this nonsense!" Satsuki shouted.

"I told you to choose me, remember?" Takemi insisted.

"I'll never choose—"

Knocking at the door suddenly cut Satsuki off. It swung open without a moment's pause.

"Forgive the interruption," Shotaro said with a bob of the head as he entered the room. Shindo left him in charge of chaperoning Satsuki in his absence.

The moment he stepped into the room, he froze stiff with a gasp. Who could blame him? The young lady he served under the unquestioning belief she was chaste was being pinned down by a man on the sofa.

"Miss! Enough of this! What has gotten into you, Mr. Kaido?!" Shotaro shouted.

He had every right to be surprised. The young woman he served was being held down by her hands and shoulders. It was obvious this wasn't consensual. He tried to dart over to them, but... Right before reaching the sofa, the horrible sense of plummeting from a skyscraper struck Shotaro. As the severe vertigo overwhelmed his senses, his consciousness slipped away!

"Mizuno!" Satsuki's cry failed to reach him as Shotaro collapsed on the spot.

"Don't worry. I just knocked him out. When he comes to, he won't remember any of this," Takemi said.

"How could you?!" Satsuki cried in a panic, but Takemi didn't seem the least bit distressed. "Stop it! How dare you humiliate a woman like this?! You should be ashamed of yourself!" she cried.

"I could say the exact same thing to you. Stop lowering yourself by sleeping around with that worthless attendant! As the heiress to such an influential family, shouldn't you be ashamed of yourself?!" Takemi shot back.

“Shindo isn’t worthless! His heart is far more dignified than yours!” Satsuki shouted in Shindo’s defense.

“Does he really mean all that much to you?!”

“He does! I love him! I love him with all my heart!” Satsuki declared. The second she shouted her words of affection, the air pressing heavily upon her suddenly let up. Able to move her bound arms once more, she realized Takemi had released her. Satsuki glared hatefully at Takemi.

“That’s all the more reason...for you to choose me, Satsuki,” Takemi said, looking down intently at her, but she continued to glare daggers at him. “If you declare I’m the guy you want, I’ll unleash all of the memories I’ve sealed away.”

“...I’m over that... I don’t want to remember anymore,” Satsuki replied weakly. Shindo told her she didn’t need to remember parts of her past that would bring her nothing but pain. Not to mention, she had no intention of offering her body to any man beside Shindo.

“You’ll regret it if you don’t,” Takemi warned, his usual frigid smile suddenly flashing across his face. “It’s a matter of life or death for Shindo.”

“Unhand her at once! Do you realize who you are manhandling in such a manner?!” came a shout undeniably wrenched with personal—not duty-bound—emotions. It forced the gears in Satsuki’s mind that moved at a sluggish crawl to finally begin turning smoothly once more. With the booming voice, the hands holding Satsuki down were pried off. She was forcibly pulled from her position pinned under Takemi.

“If you attempt anything further, we will consider you a sexual delinquent and take appropriate measures. Is that what you want?”

Shindo had burst into the drawing room in an outrage and torn Satsuki from Takemi.

After escorting Hakamada to another room, Shindo was in the midst of instructing a maid to assist the suitor when he sensed Satsuki use her powers. Although he made arrangements for Shotaro to go to the drawing room, he couldn’t shake the sense of foreboding that washed over him. Hurrying through the instructions, Shindo ordered another attendant to take over so he could head back.

The ominous feeling consumed him as he approached the open door. On the other side, he could see Takemi forcing himself on Satsuki. Along with his need to protect her as a retainer and bodyguard, his feelings for her as a man undeniably swung into full gear.

“Shindo...” Satsuki whispered hesitantly with her arms around his shoulders. She was somewhat taken aback by the strength in which he held her protectively as he wrapped his arms around her. It

wasn't like him to yell with such raw emotion in his voice. Even if a sexual delinquent stood before him, normally Shindo wouldn't raise his voice so violently.

"Talk about timing! Are your hearts bound as one or something?" Takemi scoffed with a snigger as he sat up and rose from the sofa.

"You look like you're ready to see blood. It'd suck if you killed me, so I'll take my leave for today, Mr. Shindo," Takemi said and turned his attention to Satsuki, the frigid smile never dropping from his lips. Held in Shindo's protective embrace, she clung to his suit with her eyes averted from Takemi. Neither Shindo nor Satsuki noticed the grief briefly flash across his face over how Satsuki refused to look at him.

"Satsuki," Takemi said, maintaining his usual cocky demeanor as he looked down at the girl who kept her face turned away from him, "if you're curious about what I said, keep the French doors to your room unlocked for me at night."

Satsuki's body visibly shuddered from terror over the implication. As if to hold her still, Shindo held her even tighter.

"But on the condition he isn't around. I'm not into threesomes," he declared. Stifling his laughter as he made his way out, Takemi turned back once at the drawing room door.

"The pillow talk will last all night long," he joked nastily. Turning away from the two clinging together, Takemi left the room with a casual wave of his hand.

Even after the sound of the door shutting filled the air and silence returned to the drawing room once more, Shindo didn't loosen the tight hold of his arms wrapped protectively around Satsuki. Takemi's warning still continued to echo in her head, *"It's a matter of life or death for Shindo."*

AFTER assisting Satsuki to the sofa in her room, Shindo stepped out. He explained to Hakamada that she was feeling ill and saw the suitor off. Returning straight to her room, he found she was sitting exactly where he left her.

The troubled look of uncertainty made it clear something happened between her and Takemi. Dropping to his knees before her, he placed his hands over hers.

"Did he tell you about your past?" Shindo asked.

Satsuki bit her bottom lip. She could never bring herself to tell him there was a possibility he was somehow connected to her past memories.

"Didn't I tell you there was no need to remember such things? Why is it so imperative for you to remember?" His voice was extremely kind. By no means was he chastising Satsuki for trying to

learn the past when she knew it would bring her nothing but pain.

The simple admonition “It’s a matter of life or death for Shindo” was enough to greatly inflate the urgency within Satsuki that she had to unseal those memories. But in order to do so, she had to pick Takemi as her fiancé. On top of that...

Satsuki wrapped her arms around Shindo’s shoulders, clinging to him as she whispered, “Hold me, Shindo...”

“Miss?”

“Please...” Satsuki pleaded. Holding Shindo’s head, she ran her fingers through his soft hair. She rubbed her cheek against it as she savored the softness of each strand against her fingers.

“Don’t...let me go...”

Takemi’s voice rung in her ears. “*It’s a matter of life or death for Shindo.*” His words were attempting to seize control of her heart.

“Keep me from unlocking the French doors...”

The moment those words escaped Satsuki’s lips, Shindo thrust her against the back of the sofa and kissed her. He knew Takemi told her to keep the French doors open if she wanted to learn about her past. Seeing how strangely she was behaving, he quickly realized she wanted the suitor to reveal the past.

“I won’t let you go...” Shindo promised. “...I swear...I won’t let you go.”

With the lights still turned on, their bodies melded into one on the sofa. The two made love fervently. It was as if they were trying to make the most of every last second left to them—as if there was something pushing them to make haste.

“I will be here to keep you from unlocking the doors,” Shindo swore. “I love you...Miss.” He would only be able to whisper these words of affection a little longer.

“I love you...Shindo...” There was not much time left for her to freely confess the feelings in her heart like this.

Once Satsuki chose a fiancé in two weeks...they would be forced to part.

“At least for now, don’t let me go...”

“**AREN’T** you staying with me tonight?” Satsuki asked, looking straight ahead at her reflection in the mirror attached to the dresser. Her expression in the mirror looked sad.

Her question stilled the retainer’s hands that were busily brushing her long hair. Standing diagonally behind the lady sitting before the dresser, Shindo raised his head to see the reflection of Satsuki looking at him with sadness as heartrending as the heavy sorrow carried in her voice.

“I’m staying with you. I’m not leaving your side until you’re fast

asleep,” Shindo replied and resumed brushing her hair.

“That’s not what I meant...” Satsuki mumbled embarrassedly, dropping her gaze. She began fidgeting with her fingers over her lap. It was probably difficult for her to broach the topic. Really, it was inappropriate to make a lady say such things. Realizing what she was implying, Shindo put down the brush and gently wrapped his arms around her from behind.

“Please take it easy tonight. I’m afraid you might be...tired...after I got overzealous this afternoon... Are you sore at all?” he said, making Satsuki feel even more embarrassed.

What Takemi said earlier led the two to make love on the sofa that afternoon. Shindo was honestly burning with jealousy over the suitor’s request for Satsuki to keep the French doors unlocked. He was afraid it caused him to get rougher with Satsuki more than usual.

Ever since they first became one in heart and body, they spent every night these past two weeks locked in passionate ecstasy. Shindo strived to embrace her with nothing but gentle and tender love, but...

“I’m not sore. It was different from usual...but...” Satsuki looked up at the reflection of Shindo holding her through the bangs of her hair. “...I like that side of you, too... You seemed more masculine and irresistible than usual... It was surprising even to me...” Satsuki muttered abashed, making Shindo’s heart grow tight with adoration over how she seemed far cuter than usual.

“By the way, you haven’t made any progress with the office work Father has assigned since you’ve been spending every night with me, have you? Are you going to need to cram it in to meet the deadlines?”

Shindo usually tackled his work from the headquarters of Tsujikawa Corporation after hanging up his title as retainer for the day when he tucked Satsuki in. But that work was piling up since he was spending each night these past two weeks with her.

“Miss...” Shindo whispered.

The fact that Satsuki would take notice of that and express concern for him filled Shindo with immense joy. That joy evoked tender affection, making him unable to pull away from Satsuki. Placing a hand over one cheek, he urged her to turn back toward him and silently kissed her. As they kissed, Satsuki scooted the rest of the way around. Once she was fully facing Shindo, he pulled her body towards him. He laced his fingers through the silky hair he was brushing only moments ago. As they kissed, Shindo lifted Satsuki up. He swiftly carried the young lady to her bedchambers and turned off the lights.

“Wasn’t I supposed to go straight to bed tonight?” Satsuki asked with a giggle, but Shindo silenced her with another kiss.

“I won’t let you get a wink of sleep...”

SURE, he was probably drunk. During the reception dinner, he had a bit too much to drink. He stepped out of the restaurant in hopes of clearing his head, but that was probably when he started to act a bit funny. With a slow, yet sure stride, he began to walk away from the restaurant.

As if in a drunken stupor, his eyes were only half open. His mouth was partially agape. His cheeks appeared to hang slack. His overall expression was dazed, as if he were caught in an illusion. Even strangers who passed by gave the man puzzled looks as they wondered, "Has he lost his mind?" No one would ever suspect such a man to be a Dietman's first secretary.

Once Shinichiro Hakamada came to a busy road, he began to go up the steps of an overpass. Ever so slowly, one step at a time, he made his way up, until he reached the top. Countless cars raced by below with their bright lights and noisy mufflers filling the street.

As he looked down upon the cars from his perch on the overpass, Hakamada saw a vision in those car lights. What did he see...? His promised title? The renown that was sure to follow? Or a beautiful young lady?

Reaching out to those lights, he leaned his body over the rail. His body went plummeting headlong toward the car lights.

TAKEMI slowly opened his eyes. An evil grin spread across his lips as he laughed coldly.

"Two down..." he whispered.

Looking at the night sky, he set his mind free. He was parked in front of the Tsujikawa mansion's front gate. Straddling the turned off sportbike, he telepathically confirmed that the French doors to Satsuki's room were locked. His eyes narrowed somewhat sadly as he said, "I *will* make you open them... You *must*..."

Memory of a little girl without compare in this debauch world stood smiling as she offered him a hand flashed across Takemi's mind. At the memory of her as a child, Takemi sounded tormented as he whispered, "Satsuki..."

"**DO** you remember that promise?" Satsuki asked, her voice reverberating against the left side of Shindo's chest. Shindo was stroking her hair as she leaned against him, but that question made his hand come to a stop.

"The promise we made when I was four," Satsuki elaborated. She closed her eyes, listening to his heartbeat as she enjoyed the feeling of his rock-solid chest.

Ever since she was little, she liked the feel of his pulse against his

chest. She always found comfort in the sound of his heartbeat. Whenever they made love in bed, Satsuki would listen to Shindo's heartbeat once they were done. It was almost like a ritual to make sure these happy moments weren't just a dream.

"Of course I remember," Shindo answered and resumed playing with her hair. "That was when I promised to stay by your side forever..."

Satsuki lifted her head from Shindo's chest. Looking up at him, she held out her right hand's pinky finger. "Stay with me forever..." Satsuki whispered as she gazed intently at Shindo.

Wrapping his own finger around her pinky finger, Shindo returned Satsuki's gaze as he replied, "...Of course, Miss Satsuki..."

With pinky fingers entwined, the two kissed.

Rustle...! The moment they kissed, the same wisteria swished across their minds. Their memories mixed and melded, becoming one. Their minds were thrown back to the trellis of wisteria where they made their eternal promise.

"**STAY** with me forever, please..." With her proffered pinky finger, four-year-old Satsuki laughed innocently.

"Certainly, Miss." Wrapping his finger around hers, sixteen-year-old Shindo laughed happily.

The two believed unquestioningly that promise would last forever. Satsuki believed Shindo would stay by her side. Shindo believed he could stay by her side. The feelings behind that promise were honest and pure. Neither realized it was impossible.

The feelings they harbored would never come to fruition.

Rustle...! The wisteria noisily swayed. Its petals danced down, concealing the two. If it could hide them now... If it could hide these two from their destiny now... It could save them from all the tears they would shed.

Alas, the wisteria lacked the power to conceal them. The surrounding petals it shed were like tears bemoaning its lack of power. The petals fell sadly. It was almost as if the wisteria already knew their fate. It rustled to comfort Satsuki as she gazed sadly upon the Shindo before her...and the Shindo she beheld in the distant future.

"Stay with me...forever..." Satsuki said with love and sadness as she peered into the wisteria to see the image of Shindo. "Shindo..."

Satsuki's eyes were filled with images of the distant future. She saw many years ahead, when she was eighteen. She knew of how she would break the taboo... As a little child, Satsuki knew what the future held. She could see it clearly. Her destiny was laid out before her.

Her eyes saw everything. As a little girl, she knew all that would

transpire. At this point in her life, Satsuki already knew how this would end. But now that she was eighteen, she no longer possessed memory of such things. Those memories and her foresight were sealed in the depths of her heart.

But at one point, Satsuki knew... She foresaw her own future and the fate of her romance. She knew her destiny, and shivered at what fate had planned for her.

“I’ll be with you forever...”

As their lips parted, the vision of the past that raced through their minds vanished.

“Even if I must step down as your retainer...I’ll always be with you,” Shindo promised.

“Shindo...”

The only light shining on these two was the meager illumination of a floor lamp. That dim lighting was all they had to see the expression on the other’s face.

“I was always afraid,” he said, confessing his innermost feelings with his eyes transfixed on Satsuki. “As you grew more beautiful with each passing year, my feelings for you grew from platonic to romantic. They grew so strong and vast, I had no hope of ever reigning them in. I was able to keep myself in check because of my duties as your retainer, but I also lived in constant fear.”

Shindo caressed Satsuki’s cheek and traced the outline of her lips with his thumb. “I was afraid that someday all it would take was a little trigger and I would corrupt you... The very man charged with protecting you from being tainted would sully you... The thought that I might corrupt you terrified me...”

Satsuki nuzzled Shindo’s hand, holding it with one of her own hands.

“Shindo, you haven’t corrupted me,” Satsuki asserted. Removing his hand from her cheek, she looked him square in the eye. “You’ve filled me with happiness, Shindo. I’m overjoyed by the love you’ve shown me.”

“Miss...” Shindo whispered as he wrapped his arms around Satsuki.

She was like an angel. Breathing pure air, she only walked a clear, noble path. No matter how vile of a human heart she touched, no matter how horrible of an accident she beheld, her heart was always the height of purity. The act of tainting such an angelic figure could never go unpunished.

“Miss...” Shindo whispered in her ear with his arms still wrapped around her. “Please...kill me...”

Satsuki’s body began to tremble.

“Someday, I will be punished...punished for tainting you.”

“Shindo...”

“When that time comes, I want you to kill me,” he said.

“No!” Satsuki pushed Shindo with all her might, pulling away from his arms and glaring angrily at him.

“No one is going to punish you! I could never kill you... I won’t allow things to come to that!” Satsuki cried and flung herself onto Shindo. She thrust her lips upon his. Forcing her tongue upon his, she sucked at his lips. Shindo slowly laid Satsuki back down on the bed.

“Stay with me forever...” Satsuki pleaded. The moment Shindo’s lips began to trace the length of her neck, they parted hers. She leaned her head back, arching her neck to make it easier for him. “Stay with me forever and ever...”

Even after realizing their mutual love, their hearts were still lost and wandering.

Even after sharing the ecstasy of becoming one, their hearts knew no peace. And they never would so long as they continued to care for one another. Not so long as they wished to stay together. Such desires doomed their hearts to wander endlessly.

“I will stay with you forever...Miss,” Shindo promised.

Their secret love doomed them to wander in this labyrinth.

Meanwhile, other forces were at work around them.



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